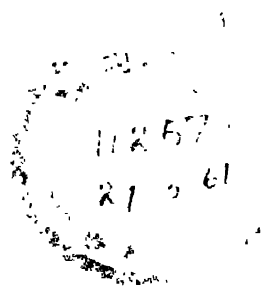


By Diana Gaines

**MARRY IN ANGER
DR. LOGAN'S WIFE
TASKER MARTIN**

DIANA GAINES

Dangerous Climate



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TO EDIE

Gamblers traffic in base gain, and all such acquisitive acts are sordid. Moreover, a confirmed gambler is a perjurer and a blasphemer, and is at the same time prodigal and greedy; and if not so already by nature, he soon becomes irascible; he cherishes vain hopes in his idleness and he corrupts the youth.

Liber De Ludo Aleae
by Gerolamo Cardano, d. 1576

CHAPTER I

ON THE LAST afternoon of November, 1848, a gathering nor'easter cried down the streets of New York. It piled the slush and refuse into icy drifts against the gutter, preserving potatoes, cabbages and butcher's offal until a thaw should release them to the pigs. It snuffed the whale oil lamps outside the Bowery grogshops. It bit at the bones of a drayman who thundered an empty cart over the cobbles of Water Street. In Five Points it tore a jangling door off the Old Brewery—a door that had resisted weather for over half a century—and in the Cow Bay tenements it howled with redoubled strength as it met itself coming through cracks and around corners.

At the top of the stair well in one of the Cow Bay flat buildings, Belle McGlory sat fondling her button collection. The wind pushed mean fingers under the cuffs of her pantaloons and pinched her huddled breasts through the reefers. The buttons were cold as hailstones in the cup of her hands, but they made cheery little clicks as she let them pour against each other. Thin ones, thick ones, metal ones, bone ones, shiny ones, dull ones; shoe buttons, cuff buttons, coat buttons, brass buttons, red buttons, pearl buttons—she had almost two hundred, one hundred and sixty-eight to be exact, so many that she could not hold all of them at once any more, so many that she had passionate favourites and was considering naming them. The collection had been slyly, greedily acquired over a period of years. It was her only private property.

Through the thin clapboard walls Belle could hear the Widow Cassidy singing. The Widow Cassidy sewed laces for

the gentry, and she kept herself company the while by singing the old country songs of her childhood. To listen to her piping, you'd have thought there wasn't a heart in all Ireland that didn't ache with black sorrow, but there was a kind of yearning sweetness to the ballads for all that. "My head by the side of his head, my lips on his lips in the grave . . ." mourned the Widow, but the sound of grief was lessened by the aroma of cabbage and pigs' tails soup that floated up the stair well. Belle picked through the buttons for the white bone one and popped it into her mouth. It warmed quickly between her tongue and her palate. The juices ran in her mouth, and she wiped at the corners of her mouth with the back of her hand. It was nice, when you came to think of it, that sucking didn't melt a button any. But sucking a button was a poor substitute for eating, and she was hungry. Her stomach pulled with emptiness. If only Uncle Paddy would slip out of the flat. She could hear his lumbering movements within. The kitchen would be warm. Aunt Kate was niggardly, begrudging even a few sticks of wood, but Uncle Paddy liked his comforts. There'd be a fire in the stove and maybe some tea left in the pot. And under the pillow on her cot she'd stored the heel of yesterday's bread. But Aunt Kate wouldn't be home from her charwork for another hour at least, and Belle took good care not to be caught alone by Uncle Paddy these days. If anyone had told her the time would come when she'd welcome Aunt Kate's footfall, she'd have laughed in his eye. But grown folk were wayward creatures. The least little thing set them astray, so you couldn't depend on them either as friends or as enemies. They cautioned you to fear God and then they'd fly in the face of Him till you held your breath for the Hand of Vengeance that would strike them dead on the spot. (Which, like the rest of their lies, never came to pass.) One minute they patted your head and the next they clobbered it with the butt of a broom till your ears chimed like the Bells of St. Mary's.

Uncle Paddy now, he'd never so much as noticed her existence all these years. Then one day last summer he gave her a

long strange look, soft yet canny too, and he offered to teach her the trade. Uncle Paddy was a huge block of a man with fiery hair and hearty features. He was always well dressed when he went out on a job, and fairly sober too. In his tall beaver hat, his black frock coat and bell-bottomed pants, and the bright floppy kerchief knotted under his stock, he looked as grand as the rich. Doubling her steps to his stride, she'd sniff the tender elegance of the Macassar oil—only the greenhorns used that stinking bear grease—and she'd sneak admiring glances at his moustache, red and thick as a fox brush, and the cocky tilt of his black cigar. As she strolled in the autumn twilight beside Uncle Paddy to the Atlantic Gardens or Barnum's Museum, a sense of the future would rise in her and surge and bubble until her head felt light and her step had the bounce of a jig. To know everything, to be old and safe and free—ah, that would be the day!

There was no one in the whole Bloody Ould Sixth Ward who didn't look up to Uncle Paddy, always excepting Aunt Kate, who had no use for any man. Not only was Uncle Paddy a member of that powerful gang, the Plug-Uglies, but it was he who blasted the silver trumpet at the head of as fine a volunteer fire engine company as New York had ever mustered. The foremanship of a fire company was an honour rarely awarded to a man without steady employment, but the men knew that Uncle Paddy took a lyric pride in his calling, and, stout sons of the shamrock that they were, they all agreed it was not so much what a man did to keep himself alive in this coldhearted world but the pride he took in doing it.

"The good people of society," Uncle Paddy would expound, "have no understanding of the true pickpocket. 'Tis an appetite he has for his work that's as strong as a married man's craving for spirits. Reform a pickpocket? Might as well tell a swallow not to travel. Ah, the sight of a watch chain dangling on a vest! Begob, if it don't put the itch of pizen ivy in a man's pinchin' fingers!"

Belle had learned the trade fast. She was always quick to

catch on to a thing. "Naturally light-fingered!" and "Plucky as Shamus of Connemara," Uncle Paddy praised her. He took all the money she made, but he promised to buy her a set of clothes that would make all the difference in her life. He said she'd be turned in a twinkling from a ragtag tomboy to the colleen of a man's dreams. How often she'd seen in her dreaming eye each piece of the set: the ruffled bodice, the skirt belled with yards of plumed velvet and bands of fur around and around it, the feathered bonnet, the mittens of lace, the cashmere shawl, the varnished shoes, perhaps even a muff. It was not so much the clothes themselves she hankered for—she enjoyed going about in pantaloons, they were warm and comfortable, and they left her free to run and climb—but it was the great change in her life the store-bought clothes would work that she longed to experience. However, months had gone by, she was past seventeen already, and she hadn't seen hide nor hair of the finery. And truth to tell, the more she saw of Uncle Paddy, the less she wanted a husband.

Not that she blamed him for trying to drown himself in a bottle, poor trapped fellow. It took the courage of the Dutch to come home to a skinflint like Aunt Kate. Uncle Paddy claimed he'd turned to drink to be able to look at her and afterward to blot out the memory. Aunt Kate vented most of her spleen on her man but there was often some left for her unwanted niece. Unhappily, Belle had a dander of her own. The crockery flew when she and Aunt Kate mixed. As Uncle Paddy often said, the day would come when the two biddies in his barn would fight to the finish and the showdown would put the Grand Turk himself to everlasting shame.

Still, it was not any mortal violence from Aunt Kate that worried Belle. It was the queerness that had come over Uncle Paddy in his way with her. Sober, he'd eye her like a tomcat till she turned clumsy, stumbling and dropping things and feeling the sick prowl of fear in her innards. Drunk, he'd find her out in the dark corners and his hands would be over her like spiders, his thighs pinning her to the wall so that she'd have to

bite or knee her way free of his reeking frame. These liberties he took when Aunt Kate's back was turned, and Belle shuddered to think of her helplessness against his strength if he should catch her alone. She had learned to skulk about in the halls until she heard Aunt Kate's dragging step or railing voice. She'd taken to sleeping in her clothes on her cot in the kitchen, and she'd trained herself to alert the instant the snoring in the bedroom ceased. Now, when he lurched out to wake her in the morning, she was ready for him, her eyes wide, her teeth clamped, her hand closed over the meat knife under the covers. Knowing the part of her he wanted to wake, she'd hold still till he was bent in two over her and then she'd roll out sideways so quickly that he'd lose his balance.

"Ach, what a wild thing ye are!" he'd growl, righting himself, but there was little more that he could say or do with his shrew sleeping only a cotton curtain away.

Well, it was past time for his evening tongue-wetting in one of the snugs of the neighbourhood, so maybe the pain in his chest had got him again. The old cock!

She decided not to wait any longer. Maybe she could wheedle a bite to eat at Murphy's. Tim Murphy was always kindness itself to her because he'd known her mother. He often let her have the leavings on a customer's plate, and some of those dudes left more than they ate. Murphy's got the uptown rich as well as the local poor this year. Even the kid-gloved, japan-booted gentry came there to drink fire-new rum and to watch the dogfights and the cockfights and the rat-killings. There, under the gritty eyes of George Washington and the American Eagle, Broadway swells and their light-o'-loves leaned over the pit shoulder to shoulder with sour-smelling carmen and knuckle-duster bullies, all betting madly on Pig Pate who had killed a terrier in 4.40, or on Johnny Small's famous fighting chicken, Grand Turk.

Belle slipped the buttons back into the tobacco pouch, and prised the top stair from its setting. A rat shot out of the uncovered dark, and she sucked her breath, cowering against the

banister until it had streaked down the stairs. She hated all dark, scurrying things, there was no steeling herself, they always surprised her. She pulled the strings of the pouch hard—no rat was going to get at her buttons—and dropped it with a last pat in its cache. She replaced the plank, pounding the sides with heel of her hand. Then she walked softly down the stairs.

"Some but a day in their churchyard bed, some that I had not known were dead," crooned the Widow Cassidy. . . .

The windows of Murphy's shone hazy yellow in the murk. Two gentlemen, Fancy Dans by the look of them, alighted from a hack and entered the tavern. Belle slipped in, close on their heels. The hoop chandeliers swayed in the fresh blast of wind, and the tobacco smoke made slow sinuations against the ceiling. It was too early for pitfights, but the men stood three deep at the bar, and most of the tables were filled. Nippy weather was the saloon-keeper's boon.

All eyes turned on the two newcomers, and the noise dwindled. The crowd at the brass rail parted like the Red Sea to make a place for the two gentlemen. Belle glided, unnoticed, beside them to the counter before the ranks closed again.

"Mr. Tilden, 'tis indeed a pleasure, sir!" the bartender exclaimed, his curled moustaches twitching. "And Mr. Van Buren, sir. 'Tisn't often we're honoured to have the President's son in our humble establishment."

The tall thin blue-eyed man laughed and clapped his companion's shoulder. "Nice of him not to say *ex-President*, even prophetic, eh, John? It won't be long before we have your father back where he belongs."

"What's your pleasure, gentlemen? Will it be brandy or bourbon? Don't know as I'd recommend the rum."

"Two brandy smashes. Where's Murphy?"

"Just stepped out to the barber's shop, as luck would have it. And 'tis his own heart he'll be feeding on when he hears he missed the serving of Samuel J. Tilden and John Van Buren."

The men from the tables edged up to the bar. They pressed close to the celebrities, calling out eager questions. Belle, up to her ears in waistcoats, caught tags of phrases and names: "Free-Soil party" . . . "Whig nominees" . . . "Zachary Taylor" . . . "Millard Fillmore." The tall man did the talking, leaning on his hand, staring into the mirror where the reflection of all but his head was blotted out by the rows of bottles. It was almost too easy. Belle's two trained fingers slithered across the lower portion of his vest, lifted the watch, slipped it into the pocket of her pantaloons. Then she pushed her way out of the crush and opened the front door. That was a mistake. She should have gone out the back, for the blast of cold air drew momentary attention, and before the door had closed behind her, she heard his cry: "My watch! Stop that boy! Thief! Thief!"

Instead of running down the street where she might be overtaken, Belle sharply turned to the right, ran along the side wall of Murphy's, ducked to a standstill behind the old beer barrel that stood familiar as a tree near the back door of the saloon. Angry voices . . . a whistle blown, and a moment after, the answering thud of boots. The boots came to a halt in front of the saloon, and the hubbub of voices rose. She took the watch from her pocket—it was still warm in her hand—and held it over the rim of the barrel, ready to abandon it if the boots should come her way. While the wind inhaled for its next wail, a cat leaped from the barrel, brushing Belle's chest, whiskering her cheek. Her scream, long and shrill, served as a compass to the boots, galvanized them to action. For a split second she tried to force herself to drop the loot. Then, clutching it still, she sped across the back of the yard, jumped the fence, ran through the alleyway to Canal Street. The pain in her side broke the rhythm of her running. A wagon lumbered by, heading toward the North River. In one swift upspring, she made the rear of the wagon, spread-eagled on the pile of hides. The ironshod wheels and her pounding heart shrank the sound of

the pursuing boots, which became fainter and slower and finally foundered altogether.

She lay on her belly, panting, spent.

After a few minutes the stench of uncured leather forced her to a sitting position. She held the smashed face of the watch to her ear, but she could not be sure that its tick was not the beat of her own blood. Not that it mattered. It was the gold that counted, not the tick. And the chain was gold too, she could tell by the weight. She didn't think much of the ill-shaped black pebble on the end of the chain. A man who socialized with the son of a President might have been expected to wear something more than a little beach stone as a fob. But you never knew. Some jewellery had what they called sentimental value. People got notions, went soft over odd things. Like herself with buttons.

She held the smooth back of the watch to her cheek before she slipped it into her pocket. Exultation warmed her like a toddy. "Belle McGlory, you're a cool one," she told herself lovingly. She tucked her raw ankles under her, and she slitted her eyes to the cobblestones that ran out from under the wagon, polished by old snow and lamplight. The wheels hammered the stones, rattled her bones, wagged her head like a bonnet on a stick. No driver's whip could spur horses like a north-east wind.

They passed the Tub of Blood and Hell's Kitchen and Dora Schmidt's Boarding House. A sailor rocked down the street with his head in his jacket. They passed the Snug Harbour. At each place, she thought to jump down off her perch, but she didn't budge. She could find a fence at any of the taverns, and almost any one of them had a "velvet room" in the back where she could flop for the night with the drunks who were sleeping it off. But then in the morning there'd be nothing for it but home again.

She could smell the salt of the river. The web of masts came into view, and the thicket of smoke-stacks, blacker than the evening sky. The slips were filled with every kind of vessel

from sloop to clipper ship, the air mournfully rife with the creaks and groans that the blow wrenched from their timbers.

The wheels of the wagon began to slow and she heard the driver's, "Whoa, lads! Whoa there!"

She jumped, ran down the pier, zigzagging among the barrels and crates as she made her way to the side of the ship, a monstrous thing, bigger than a warehouse, its body abristle with skyscraping masts and sail riggings as well as two smokestacks stuck in the middle of its spine. The great paddle wheel in its side was still, the eye of its furnace not yet alight, but the bow deck was shadowy with scudding figures, and she could hear the thinned shouts of the men as they loaded cargo. The gold letters on the white frame stern said :

THE FALCON

A rope ladder hung from the stern to the spray rail, but the spray rail was now several feet above the water line, and the nearest part of the hull was more than ten feet from the pier's edge. Even if she jumped into the water, there was no way of reaching the ladder, and in any case, she didn't know how to swim. The ship's boat hung in its rigging above the ladder. If she could only scale the side, she could hide in the lifeboat till the ship was under way.

She decided that the paddle wheel which spanned the distance between the deck of the ship and the edge of the pier was her best bet. She shinnied up the slimy mooring bitt and gained the flange that based the wheel frame. It was no wider than the ball of her foot, so she inched across on tiptoes, the weight of her body thrown against the frame, her arms espaliered like vines on a wall. She kept her eyes closed till her foot found the end of the ledge, then she grabbed the lowest rung of the ladder and hung from it a moment above the slapping oily water. Then, holding fast to the rope and leaning away from the ship, she walked the hull horizontally until she could wind her ankles around the second rung. With a last spurge of effort, she flung herself at the third rung, her hands grasping

the rope above her knees. Not daring to look below, she climbed on vibrating legs till the gold letter "L" on the stern was as tall and as wide as she.

Once aboard, she swung like a monkey into the lifeboat. Using part of the tarpaulin as mattress and part as cover, she curled up under the thwarts and closed her eyes. So tired . . . so tired . . . but the wind was slashing her face. She pulled the tarp over her head, and gradually the warmth that her body gave off heated the snugger in which she lay. Thus wind-proofed, cradle-rocked, rich with the bit of gold in her pocket, safe from the law and indeed from all adult authority, she swung drowsily between thought and dream. She wondered what distant place the ship was bound for. But she didn't really care. She had nothing to lose except trouble. Her only pang was for the button collection left behind. The round white bone one that her tongue knew so well, the flat round silver ones and gold ones, like coins . . .

Well, she was done with playthings. From now on, her collections would be of the real thing—money. With money would come not only food and fun and finery but safe conduct. The blessed peace of the day when she needn't freeze in her tracks at the sound of a boot, needn't hide from a copper nor duck a blow! And then, because she was a little afraid of the unknown after all, she slipped into her mouth the pebble on the end of the gold chain. But only for a moment or two. An unaccustomed proprietor puts care of property above pleasure in it. Before she surrendered to sleep, she put her fortune back in her pocket.

CHAPTER II

THE WIND KEPT a hand on her cradle, the tarpaulin held off the light rain that had begun to fall. The rain patter smothered the ship's noises—the creaking of pulleys, the groaning of chains, the hoisting and the stowing, the clank-clank of the anchor pulled up short, and finally, the shouts of farewell as the *Falcon* steamed out of its slip. Even at dawn, in that weather, there was a band of people at the dock to call god-speed to the small steamer, for the departure of a ship to faraway places was still something of an incident to the landlubbers of New York.

Only a handful of passengers pressed the guardrails to wave their goodbyes. There were exactly twenty-nine of them, all young men, federal employees and missionaries, booked through to California. But passengers were secondary to cargo on the *Falcon*, which was embarked on its first mail run to the Isthmus of Panama. There, a sister ship on the Pacific side would take the *Falcon's* mail and supplies and those few passengers who had reason to brave the Wild West on the second leg of the journey. Thus far, the route from New York to San Francisco had been around the Horn—a matter of six months. The new route exploiting the cut across the isthmus was designed to reduce this time by more than half. Not that the *Falcon's* passengers were in any great hurry to get to California. The federal men were on it because they had been assigned to it by their superiors, and the missionaries had chosen it—as Belle had—because it was leaving at the time they wanted to leave, though several of them began to wish

that they had waited for spring weather when, a few miles out, the rain swelled to storm, and sledge-hammer waves pounded the *Falcon*, whose size seemed to diminish with every pitch.

Belle slept through the first of the storm. But when the heavy swells rolled in off Sandy Hook, she woke to pain and nausea and punishing darkness. Retching, cold with sweat, she dragged herself out of the little boat and slid and stumbled across the deck where a leeward wind kept her from being washed overboard. She propelled herself by the rails down the stairway, and, following the sound of voices, she burst into the main saloon.

"Help!" she cried to the blur of faces. "Mother of God, help me—somebody—I'm mortal sick!"

Before she fainted dead away, she felt herself lifted by some gentle godfather on whom—to her everlasting shame—she vomited again. After that, she lay on a shelf against the wall in a tiny little room whose moans matched her own. Now and then lukewarm liquids were slopped through her slack lips. The liquids turned to bile that she vomited at once, but her bones were so mauled from rolling about on the shelf that she had no strength to fight off the feedings.

She woke at last in a half-light which might have been early morning or vaporous afternoon. A man sat on a chair against the wall. He was shuffling a deck of cards on a little table that just covered his knees. The hanging lantern lit his head with a misty halo, and the face was that of a stern Gabriel. It was the deck of cards, unseemly equipment for heaven, that encouraged her to speak.

"Will I not die then?"

The man looked up, set the table aside, stood over her. His features were indistinct in the fuzzy grey light, but the effect of haughty beatitude was undiminished.

"Of course not. Feeling better?"

She looked down at herself, then touched the ruffles on the unfamiliar nightshirt. She searched under the pillow, felt between the sheets.

"The watch?" she asked, wetting her lips.

"Yes, it's my watch," the man replied. "We've taken turns staying with you."

There was a fatherly complacency in his voice, and when he laid a cool firm hand to her forehead, she knew she was safe for the moment.

"What ails me?"

"The grippe, I'd guess. And the rough sea didn't help. Even some of the men had a bad time of it. There was quite a blow. Ever been on a ship before?"

She groaned in answer.

He laughed. "Hungry?"

"A drop of water is all——"

He held a glass to her lips, but she fell back after a sip.

"I expect you need nourishment. I'll fetch you some broth."

"Don't leave me," she begged. She was surprised to find herself crying. One of his gold curls hung down the side of his forehead. Through her tears she watched him thread it back with his fingers.

"Don't worry, little one. You're over the hump. Your fever's gone and the ocean's as calm as a road. You'll be all right now. I'll see that you get some broth."

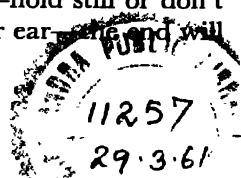
She must have fallen back to sleep before the broth came because when she woke she had no recollection of seeing the fair-haired man again or anyone else. A pillar of sunshine leaned thick as a plank from the porthole, broke in golden chips on her blanket. There was a plate of biscuits at her bedside and a carafe. She champed on the hard biscuit, the crumbs falling down the neck of the shirt, and she drank from the carafe. Ah, that was the broth. She was drinking it too fast. She lay back and waited for the nausea to come, but it did not.

Her pantaloons and jacket hung, patched and pressed, from a hook on the wall. The watch and chain lay on the chest of drawers. At the sight of it, her spirits soared tipsily. It was a dear little snug room, about eight feet square, with a porthole and a latticed door. There was a washstand with two pitchers

and two basins, and two shelves built on to the wall. Clean white towels hung on the rack. The bureau had cut-glass handles. Soft blue curtains were drawn back from her berth. She touched them with her hand. Silk.

Life was suddenly too promising to permit of lying abed. She got up and, resolutely ignoring the buckling of her legs, made straight for the mirror over the chest. Green eyes stared out of pain-darkened sockets. The freckles stood out, each one like a grain of brown sugar on the pale skin. She had lost weight during her illness, and now her bones so carved up her face that it offered new patterns of shape and shadow as she turned different sides of it to the mirror.

She gave her shorn matted curls a few disheartened tugs. Curse Aunt Kate, would they never grow out? Her long black waving hair had been her one vanity, down to her waist it had come, and Tim Murphy himself had praised its beauty, remarking that her mother's had been the same. "Crowning glory," he called it, gifted as he was with a blarney tongue, and after that, she'd taken to combing the knots out of it in front of Uncle Paddy's mirror. The frequent combings had unfortunately caught the attention of Aunt Kate, who forthwith borrowed the Widow Cassidy's sewing scissors, sat Belle down on the upturned water-bucket, and hacked away till she was cropped close as winter pasture. "That'll save you from the venial sin of pride, Miss Daisy-o," Aunt Kate had asserted. "'Crowning glory,' is it now?"—for Belle had let the phrase slip in a desperate effort to forestall the haircut—"I'll glory you, you randy little heathen. I'll crown you good before I see you go the wicked way of your poor sinning ma, and you taking after her more every day with them evil cat's eyes of yours, the way they bat at every lanky strip of a Mickey Dazzler, even your uncle, more's the shame. Oh, don't think I don't see it, the dirty shenanigans that go on in the dark nooks of this house! The end of that wild-flower face of yours—hold still or don't blame *me* if the shears grabs a piece of your ear—she and will



have the devil making garters of your limbs the way it happened to your own man!"

Often Belle had searched the piece of looking glass that hung over the sink for traces of a mother or even a wild flower, but she was never pleased with her reflection. Cat's eyes, as Aunt Kate had said, the nose always freckled regardless of season, the lips too full as if they'd been slapped swollen, which indeed they often had, the brow, not high and serene under smooth-parted hair as was the fashion, but low as a black-thatched shanty.

"Ach, the devil with it!" she muttered to the pale but feisty visage in the ship's mirror. What if she didn't look like the darling of a man's dreams? It was money she wanted, money and the freedom to spend it, and she'd never get these things stuck in some Dan's arms like a lily in a vase.

She splashed some water on her face, pulled on the pantaloons, buttoned the woollen jacket, cursing aloud to keep up her courage. What did they do with stowaways, she wondered nervously. Weight her with chains, probably, and keep her in some filthy hold till they put into shore for police. And wasn't that just like grown folk—to watch over a girl while she was sick, to nurse her and feed her back on her feet in order to hand her over to the law? Well, she'd not hand over easy. She'd give them a time of it, or her name wasn't Belle McGlory!

She pinched her cheeks and licked her lips, pocketed the watch, and flung out of the door of the cabin, spoiling for a fracas.

To her confusion, she was hailed by the men at the deck rails as if she were a prodigy. They treated her with an in-curious, affectionate approval that transformed her truculence to bewilderment and, finally, to berry-tart charm. Over a period of four days and four nights several of these men had held her head, fed her, changed her bed linen, sponged her clammy forehead, resigned their hairy hands to her desperate clasp until needles ran down their arms. Those who hadn't

nursed her had discussed her so minutely that they felt like blood relatives, for there is no emotion stronger in the unsuspecting red-blooded male than his streak of maternity. If Belle had been a woman, they might have taken a leering interest in her sexual availability. If she had been a boy, they might have consigned the stowaway to work in the galley. A man might have been put in irons. But this delicately made creature with the face of a winter pansy and the tongue of an Irish minx fell into none of the easily identifiable categories. Even Captain Hartstein questioned her for the sake of form rather than for information, and he wryly ignored the slips that might have cooked her goose with a more exacting tribunal.

"Can you pay for your passage?" he asked, resting his cap on the desk. "The steamer fare from New York to Chagres is a hundred and fifty dollars, but I daresay you won't be going that far."

She sat across from him at the mahogany desk, enchanted by the trim quarters that curiously enough gave an impression of space. Like a housewife for the little people, she thought to herself, marvelling at the polished brass and the wheel clock and the curtains tied back from the portholes. Through the open door of the adjoining room she could see the painted shaving mug on the shelf and the neatly spread bunk.

The captain himself was short, thickset, with weathered dewlaps and gentle eyes. He was bald except for a cuff of grizzled hair that narrowed at the temples and flared at the jaw into a horseshoe beard. From the backs of his hands, his wrists, even his nostrils and ears sprang wiry coils of the hair he grew so abundantly everywhere except on his head.

She put her hand in her pocket, slipped the pebble off the chain, and placed the watch and the chain before him on the desk with a style that made it a personal gift.

"I'll pay my fare with this," she said.

Captain Hartstein turned the watch over and over, flicked

open the back panel with his thumbnail, and bent his head to the works. "Where'd you come by a man's watch, Belle?"

His blue and gold uniform seemed suddenly official, and she fought a plummet of guilt.

"Well, I'll tell you, your Honour—Captain, I mean—it was my uncle's watch, and I filched it because I came to the rope's end, you might say. My Uncle Paddy, rich as he is and the great one for politics—fair runs the city of New York—is given to drink. And drink turns him into a fiend as you couldn't believe in your right mind. The truth is, he beat me the other night for the last time. Black and blue I was and running with blood and me a poor orphan who never saw her own dear mother. Well, I made up my mind then and there to run away from home. There was his watch lying on the dresser and himself snoring away like Gideon's own horn and I was that needy, I took it."

"What did you say your uncle's name was?"

"Padraic Tooley, sir. And a mighty decent name it is. Well known at Tammany Hall. Maybe you've heard it spoken yourself, you a captain of a fine ship——?"

"No, can't say I have. But the initials on the inside of this watch are S.J.T."

The *inside*?

"Aach, well, it's like this. The watch come down to Uncle Paddy from his own dear father, Sean Joseph Tooley, my great-uncle, may the Lord rest his soul. When Great-uncle Sean breathed his fighting last, what did he do but hand over his fine gold watch to his only son, Paddy." She lowered her lids in reverence for the departed. She sighed. "And that's how the initials come to be S.J.T., sir."

Captain Hartstein sighed too. "How old are you, Belle?"

"Twenty-one, sir."

"Twenty-one? Look a lot younger."

"Small-boned is the reason, Captain. And all them beatings fined me down. And do you mind the sickness I've had all

these days and nights? It's a wonder I've not shrunk to nothing at all."

"You know that stealing is a sin forbidden by the seventh commandment of God?"

"I do that, sir."

"Know that lying is a sin forbidden by the eighth commandment?"

"I do that, sir."

"Still say that this is your uncle's watch and that you're twenty-one years old?"

"I do, sir, and I'd be flying in the face of heaven if I told you a lie, Captain." And to herself, she rationalized that only part was lie and part truth so that in all fairness the Lord could only take part of the fortune she was going to make, and who could want for a better partner?

Captain Hartstein stroked his beard. His eyes twinkled. "Well," he said, "ain't as if we don't have cabin space to burn. And the men who've sat up nursing you would skin me alive if I didn't let you off easy. Besides, you're not yet a hardened criminal. Still turn pink and breathe fast when you're in a pinch, eh?"

They smiled at each other as men shake hands over a bargain. He told her then that they were bound for Chagres on the isthmus. The next stop would be Havana, and after that, if all went well and the weather was fair, they would stand in for the port of New Orleans. It was agreed that she should disembark at New Orleans since there was little future for a lone young American girl in a town of heathen blacks.

The days that followed aboard the *Falcon* were halcyon days for Belle. The weather was mild, the sea docile, the salt air bracing. She had the run of the ship from forecastle to wheelhouse, so she felt no confinement. Her cabin, first room of her own, gave her a heady sense of personal dignity and she rehearsed her acquaintance with her developing femininity in the privacy of her mirror again and again.

Meals were served in the main saloon four times a day, the fare was plentiful and wholesome, and to Belle, who had never before had enough to eat, it had the taste of ambrosia. Breakfast at eight consisted of broiled ham, eggs, frizzled bacon, spatchcock, salted shad, and mutton cutlets. For luncheon at twelve there were pilot biscuit, corned round, and ale or porter or milk. Dinner at five was a banquet of beef or pork or lamb with pastries and dried fruits for dessert. And at ten there was supper, the same as the lunch snack, with salt beef and sea bread and cheese and hot strong tea. The passengers, being young and male, ate second and third helpings, and Belle did her best to keep up with them. She rose from each sitting, glassy-eyed with surfeit, sluggish as a fly in a bakeshop window.

As the ship's Cinderella, she was nourished by more than food. The men petted and spoiled her, now flirting, now fond. Even Moses the crow, who lived in the forecastle with the deckhands, left off play with his jackknife to eye Belle with beady infatuation as she fed him bread crusts. And she, who had loathed the screeching fowl and beggary animals that strayed the streets and the vestibules of the Five Points, paid daily social visits to the milk cow and pigs and ducks and chickens and sheep that occupied the steerage dormitory. She fed them tidbits and cooed over their nuzzlings, and was often saddened by the thought that they were future meals—though her appetite remained unaffected.

Giddy with the unaccustomed attention, Belle set herself out to be entertaining. She read the men's fortunes from the lines in their palms, mouthing generalities with the same moony mysticism that Gypsy the Whore had affected in Donovan's Lane. She delighted the Protestant missionaries with her ability to turn whole passages of Bible text to memory. She joined in the song fests with the crew as they took their ease in their hammocks on off watches. Her sweet contralto brought tears to the sailors' eyes with "Father, Dear Father, Come Home with Me Now" and "Be Kind to the Loved Ones at Home" and "You'll Never Miss Your Sainted Mother Till

She's Dead and Gone to Heaven." These currently popular ballads she privately termed "the slops," and although she loved the bleary emotion they evoked, she much preferred such lively reels as "Here Comes Dan" and "The Fiddler" and the salty tunes she picked up from the sailors: "Fisher's Hornpipe" and "Plum Duff" and "Bell-Bottom Trousers."

Mornings she spent on deck with the passengers who sat clustered on the bow, their feet hanging over the guards, their eyes adream on the horizon or following the shore. They never tired of watching the birdlike flashes of flying fish, the schools of dolphin, the purple nautili floating on the water. The ship hugged the coastline so that one could see with the naked eye the white sand beaches and the forests behind, the occasional huts of fishermen and their ducklike crafts off the shore. The breeze had the balm of the month of May, and it was a wonder to Belle that New York should be beset by blizzards while here on the southern strand the sun beat down like summer. The names of the trees that the men spoke had a rich, strange sound—live oak and mangrove and cypress—and when, after a quick thundershower, the wind came fresh from the land, the lush vegetable odour of the cypress swamp was more intoxicating to her senses than Uncle Paddy's Macassar oil or the French perfumes of the courtesans at Murphy's. When the lighthouse of St. Augustine was sighted, the men were moved to recall what they knew of Ponce de León, of De Soto and the early Spanish adventurers. Listening enthralled, Belle came to feel that she had spent her life inside a walnut. Now, in one stroke, the future spread wide before her, and the past rolled back, and the world was so big she thought her heart would burst with the size of it.

Afternoons and evenings, Belle spent with the gambler, Lucius Talent. She had no trouble distinguishing him as the man who had been with her when she first returned from her visit to purgatory. He was the only man aboard with flaxen hair, the only man who called her "little one." And his deck of cards was as much a part of his costume as his buff velour

chimney-pot hat, his hand-painted vest, his shiny black Wellington boots, his jewellery. Enough jewellery, Belle often thought, to drive a pickpocket clear out of mind with the finger's itch. In the voluminous ruffle which sprang quivering from his bosom sparkled a large diamond. Locked on both wrists were heavily embossed gold bracelets, on his fingers snakes of gold with emerald eyes, and from his watch fob dangled miniature gold charms. (And not a watch easily lifted, attached as it was to a gold chain that looped several times around the gambler's neck.) Besides his jewellery, there were the gold buttons on his vest and coat, each one embossed with a prancing pony.

That a man of such elegance should bother with the likes of her! It defied belief but there was no doubt that he welcomed her company. He mingled very little with the passengers aboard, whom he dismissed as dullards, but to Belle he showed none of the reticence usually associated with men of his profession. When she did not come to visit his stateroom of her own accord, he sent for her.

Talent had in his possession a faro outfit in a mahogany box on which was painted a rampant Bengal tiger. Besides the cards, the box contained a set of carved ivory chips, the oil-cloth layout, and a German silver dealing box which alone, he told Belle, cost one hundred and fifty dollars. Belle had watched faro in the wolf traps at the back of the alehouses, but watching was one thing and playing another. From Talent, she learned the points of the game: the betting and the odds, how to call the turns, how to heel or copper a bet, how to break even, how to string along, when to go paroli, how to keep tabs from "soda" to "hock." He taught her to shuffle and butt in the cards. He praised the alacrity of her learning, he expressed amazement at the dexterity of her fingers. She refrained from confiding the exercises which had effected their agility, sopping up his praise until it appled her cheeks and stoked green fire in her eyes.

Before long Belle was waiting upon Talent hand and foot. (With the tenacity of the orphan, she had a way of setting her

hooks in new fish.) At eleven, which was his rising hour, she brought him a tray of specially cooked food for which he paid extra, and she sat cross-legged on the floor while he regaled her with his exploits in the gambling houses of America. He'd travelled the coast from Boston to Saratoga, and he told of the fortunes he'd won and lost dealing and ducking the tiger; of the great men he'd gambled and supped with—Washington senators, Louisiana planters, New York bankers, Kentucky colonels who would lose fifty thousand dollars on a faro turn without batting an eye; of the women he'd had, and of the husbands and brothers who had sworn to kill him on sight, so that in many of the gaming resorts he had to go about in disguises, staining his face with berry juice and darkening his hair and moustache with burnt cork.

"Ah, but you're a true scoundrel, Mr. Talent!"

"Not me, my dear," he'd deprecate lightly, waving a manicured hand. "Neither true nor a scoundrel, for I skin the fools and I help the needy. Many's the time I've given a loan to a sucker I've cleaned at faro, exacting no payment but only the promise that he never touch a card again. Pass the salt, Belle, if you please. I never play against paupers, widows, cripples, or orphans, and once I saved a man from committing suicide."

"Now how did you do such a sainted thing?"

Talent daintily probed a molar with his gold toothpick. "It was easy and I salvaged a neat pocketful of fish for my pains. I was on a river boat out of Louisville when four sharpers cheated a young bridegroom out of twenty-five thousand dollars. I wasn't playing but I watched for a while and I soon saw that the game was crooked. Well, after the boy'd lost his last dollar I followed him out. In a voice as calm as mine is now he told me the money belonged to his father-in-law—it was the fee for a piece of land just sold—and that he didn't know how he could go home and face his young wife. Then he bade me good night and walked to the bow of the boat. I padded after him and when he climbed the prow, I lunged forward

and plucked him back by his coat-tails. He started to fight me, and I have a distaste for fist fights. I promised to retrieve his money. Back I went to the gaming table and offered to open a snap with a hundred spondulics. That was all the cash I had. As I played, I kept my eyes peeled and at last I saw what I was waiting for—~~an~~ old trick, the horsehair.”

The horsehair? Belle puzzled, but she waited, knowing he disliked to be interrupted.

“One of the blacklegs leaned back in his chair and the chip that he had tied to his waistcoat with a horsehair moved from the losing jack to the winning queen. I had my gun cocked before he or his partners could move. While the passengers looked on, I jerked the chip free of his vest and held the horsehair up for all to see. Then I swept the bank notes into my hat and stalked out. The young man was so overjoyed to get his money back that he kissed my hand. Revolting chap. I kept the extra ten thousand that was in the pot for services rendered. These eggs are overdone, little one. Tell the cook that they must be boiled three and a half minutes exactly. Will you remember that?”

“I will indeed. And are you a millionaire, Mr. Talent, with all the thousands you’ve won and all them bracelets and buttons and chains of gold?”

Talent wiped the corners of his mouth with the bed sheet, and signalled for his meerschaum. “To tell the truth, I’m a trifle down on my luck at the moment. The matches, too, Belle. In the top drawer. No? They must be, look again.” He puffed to the match she struck for him, and went on. “You see, I had to leave town in a hurry. A pity, too—I was going great guns. Had a place of my own on Prince Street, not large but elite, and no one set a better table in all New York. Breast of duck, venison pie, broiled oysters, salads, and cheeses—ah, my mouth waters when I think of it even though my stomach is full of this swill. And always the finest of wines—iced Heidsieck, Southside Madeira, Burgundy served at blood heat. Cigars to soothe the perturbed losers. Nothing but faro was

permitted in my house—and I cleared a neat piece of change every night.”

“And whatever happened to foul your luck?”

“Well, I—it was my love of the horses that did me in. I bought a stable of trotting horses, and one or two racers, and I reaped the wild wind. Lost my gambling house on the mile and a quarter, and then there were a few other little debts I couldn’t pay. As I say, I had to leave in something of a hurry. The upshot is, all I’ve got to my name is what I wear, these few suits of clothes and the jewellery. But I have my faro outfit and when I get to New Orleans, I’ll get back in the plush like that.” His capable fingers made a loud clean report.

“Surely you will,” Belle said, and to herself, staunchly, “Suppose he didn’t *own* the gambling house but was maybe the artist-dealer, supposing it wasn’t the horses but the police that run him out of town, still he’s a brave and gorgeous man and I declare I could look at his Gabriel face and listen to the tales he tells till the dawn of day.” Aloud again, “I’m loath to tear myself away from your interesting talk, Mr. Talent, but I’d best be getting my lunch in the saloon or I’ll miss eating altogether. Will I come back after and will we have a game?”

“Of course. By the time you come back I’ll be shaved and ready for a few finger exercises. Oh, and on your way, will you drop off those shirts to be laundered by the Chink? There’s a good girl.”

They were at the cards one afternoon when Captain Hartstein came to the cabin to announce that the *Falcon* would shortly put in at Havana, and wouldn’t Belle like to watch the approach through the ship’s glass? Belle winked at Talent and rose at once, thanking the good captain in her most ladylike tones. Captain Hartstein was, she knew, dismayed by her friendship with the gambler. She had overheard him confide his anxiety to Halversen, the helmsman, and he never missed an opportunity to distract her from “her seduction to that cheating game of chance and God knows what else, closed up

as they are in that cabin day and night, just the two of them and she a mere slip of a thing and he almost twice her age."

The *Falcon* ran under the battlements of the Morro at sunset. Feathery palm trees fringed the harbour. In the bay bright-coloured pleasure boats darted like summer bugs. The city lay to the right—~~a hill~~ of terraced bungalows of brilliant pinks and blues and yellows and whites. In their midst rose majestic public buildings, and the oriental spires of the cathedral in whose chancel, the missionaries agreed, reposed the ashes of Christopher Columbus! The green hills behind the city were dotted with the country palaces of the nobility. A wash of pink reflected from the streaked sky gave the scene a gauzy, dreamlike quality. Everything glowed with it, the decks, the masts, the passengers' faces.

"I came out here," Belle ordered daily. "It's here I want to live! Oh, for a doty pink house on an emerald hill."

But to Belle's disappointment, they were not permitted to land because of the cholera rumoured to be epidemic in New York. They were ordered up to quarantine ground and anchored beside the hulk of an old frigate which was filled with yellow fever patients. The local health officers took mail from the *Falcon* by means of a long pole with a basket on its tip, and before they touched the papers they dipped the basket in a bucket of vinegar. The boats which brought water and fresh fruit and vegetables to the *Falcon's* side were manned by white-clad soldiers who managed the delivery without actually touching the ship or any of its people.

At dinner that night, still anchored off the Cuban shore, Belle asked, "What's that gloomy bell that keeps tolling and tolling? It gives me the creeps."

"Yellow fever dead are buried after sunset," Captain Hartstein replied. "Hope there's no yellow fever at New Orleans. For your sake and Mr. Talent's. Rest of the passengers are booked through to California. Would you believe that Morro Castle and its fortifications cost thirty-eight million dollars?"

"You don't say," Belle murmured absently, dead for once to

the sound of money. Havana. New Orleans. California. The names rang purely like silver bells in her ears. Beauty, warmth, trees. Now that she was seeing the world she was beginning to wonder why anyone chose to live in New York. Oh, the lucky day she'd run from its cold and confusion, its filth, its crowds, its heartlessness!

On what they supposed was their last night aboard, Belle and Talent packed up the faro box at midnight, and went for a final stroll on deck. The ship was silent except for the off-shore wind sighing through the ropes and the steady breathing of the engine. Underfoot, every crack and seam glowed with the light of the engine's fire. They saw Halversen on dogwatch above them in the stern, his hand on the wheel, the binnacle before him, a speck of light turned on his charts. They waved and he nodded shortly. Their synchronized heels resounded on the boards. Once around the ship, they stopped and leaned over the rail. The moon was lopsided and wore a ring of mist. Only the larger constellations showed in the brown sky. The Big Dipper. Mars. Gemini. Talent had taught her their names.

"Vega the Diamond is easy to spot," he told her now, adding to her store. "Directly overhead."

"Leave it to Lucius Talent to know where the diamond's kept," she teased.

He laughed. "I admit I like jewellery, but heaven's out of my reach."

The lights from the ship gilded the sea.

"How about the gold then? How near it looks!"

"That kind of gold is for suckers."

They watched the melancholy dance of the gold-lipped waves.

"Mr. Talent, now, tell me this. How will I go about finding a place for myself in the strange city of New Orleans?"

The gambler moved his elbow from hers.

"How on earth should I know? Honest toil is something I

never tangle with. Surely you are not so innocent or so stupid as to have thought that."

Like Uncle Paddy, she thought sadly, and then wiped the blasphemous comparison from her mind. "And who's asking about *honest* toil?" she asked, bidding farewell to the intentions the missionaries had foused in her of seeking a life on the side of the angels. •

He chuckled. "You haven't fooled me, little one. But look, you're young and you're going to be—well, someday you'll be a damned bewitching woman, or I'm a poor judge. You'll want a home of your own, a family, children. This is your chance to set your cap for a safe and happy life. If you work hard and live decently——"

"Sure, and you're just the man to preach it."

"Well, do as you please, then. It's no concern of mine. I can't help you. I travel light."

"Ringadora!" Belle trilled in an effort to match his indifference. "Somebody'd think I'd asked you to carry me around like a pack on your back. I only thought that being a man who's travelled and mastered the ways of the world, you might know somebody who'd give me a hand. But never you fear, I'll get along and I thank you for nothing."

Talent made no answer, his eyes fixed on the hypnotic water.

Her throat constricted with unshed tears. Silly snivelling misbegotten dunce that she was! How could she have expected this prince of a fellow to have a care for her, once his gypsy foot got free of the prisoning ship? She had furnished a bit of amusement on an uneventful trip. She had helped keep his fingers limber for the gaming tables ashore. That was all. And, oh, the fancy women in their silks and their satins with their bobbing curls and their falling-out breasts, couldn't she just see them lolligagging around him, pressing themselves to the headlight in his shirt! She turned her gaze on the Dipper.

"I've heard many a tale of white slavery in this part of the world," she said. "If there be any young girls walking the

streets alone near the wharves, what do the sailors do but kidnap them, throw a bag over their heads, and carry them struggling and yelling aboard. Into the black hold of the ship go the helpless maids with chains to the feet like they was cattle. Off to Paris, France, they are and there the sailors sell them to brothels at so much a shilling; so I've been given to understand."

"My word."

"What's more, these poor godforsaken girls never see the light of day again as long as they live."

"What a pity."

"And would you believe it, these tender creatures are made to do such dirty things with the men of France as——"

She struggled in his grasp, blubbered under the iron-boned palm that bruised her mouth.

"What's your game, you foul-mouthed little guttersnipe?"

She froze painfully from throat to knees against the body that pinned her to the rails like a craggy boulder fallen upon her. His mouth was moist-lipped and open, and from it came his hot breath—she felt it on her skin. The tears rose from her throat, filled her eyes. She pulled the corners of her mouth down to steady her chattering teeth, and he laughed and let her go.

"You're just a baby, aren't you—for all your wanton talk? You confused me for a moment."

She continued to stare at him, tear-blinded, baleful. The bright new world lay in pieces around her. What devil dwelt inside her that could turn a man into a monster? First Uncle Paddy and now himself. She stared at him as he shot his cuffs, brushed his lapels. She could not look away. He took his hat off and ran a hand lightly through his ringlets, replaced his hat.

"Don't look at me like that, for God's sake!" he burst out.

Obediently she turned her blurred gaze to the water.

"Listen, you little idiot——"

She felt his hand on her shoulder and the touch released her

tears. She put out a flow tongue, caught a salty rivulet. The sea danced carelessly by, black and gold-lipped, endless.

"Dammit, Belle, please. Don't cry. Stop it, I say. Look—all right, I'll see that you get placed somewhere. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to turn in. I advise you to do the same. We dock early in the morning."

She heard his heels pound the companionway as if they would grind holes in the timbers. The tears ran freely down her face now, starred her lashes, laid gold prisms on the black gliding water. She let them spill on, loving her tears, loving her starred lashes, loving herself. *I'll see that you get placed somewhere.* He'd said it. Much as he hated to put himself out, he'd said it, and her heart rose like a cork and went bobbing off across the many-lipped sea.

New Orleans! "Nearest thing America has to Paris," Talent had claimed. And he'd gone on about the famous hospitality of the folk there—the opulent plantations, the fox-hunting breakfasts, the fancy-dress balls—the beauty of the Creole women and the gallantry of their men. Guttersnipe, was she? Tiralir, she'd hobnob with gentry if she died doing it, and Lucius Talent should be only the first to help her up the ladder. There were many things she had to learn. How to talk like a lady instead of a greenhorn. How to eat and how to dress and how to conduct herself in a parlour. But first—how to deal faro to *win*. Baby, was she? Well, just wait, Lucius Talent. Just wait.

CHAPTER LII

BUT BELLE WAS destined to see no more of New Orleans than she had seen of Havana—no more than could be seen from the *Falcon's* guardrails. Black smoke curling from numberless ship stacks. Tangle of frigate masts. Cotton bales piled on the weather-beaten wharves. Negroes toting, shuffling, lounging. And on either side of the wharves, like untidy mut-tonchop whiskers, the grey moss-hung cypresses of the Louisiana littoral. So much Belle saw, and no more. For, while the *Falcon* was at sea, President Polk had delivered his last message to Congress: "The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory [of California] are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in public service who have visited the mineral district. . . . The explorations already made warrant the belief that the supply is very large, and that gold is found in various places in an extensive district of the country."

Falling as they did on ears keened to the call of adventure, these words touched off America's first great migration. The Mexican War had left a wake of emotional turbidity. The young men had returned from the excitement of battle to the dawn-to-dark monotony of the farm and the countinghouse, and they were fidgety. Quill pens, hammers, trowels, ploughs are dull tools after rifles and bowie knives. There had been rumours of gold strikes for several months but only the chronic wanderers had heeded them. Now, corroborated by the President, the news had a fourteen-carat ring that reverberated

throughout the western world. Gold fever became epidemic overnight. The rush to California was on.

When the *Falcon* let down her gangplank on the New Orleans levee, a horde of gaunt, stony-faced, bearded backwoodsmen hung with pots and pans and pickaxes and rifles stomped aboard the packet. Two hundred strong they scrambled topside, clamouring for passage to Chagres. Captain Hartstein insisted that the *Falcon* had berths for only half of them, but the Argonauts refused to be turned aside. They draped themselves along the rails, squatted on the tackle and the ropes, spat tobacco juice on the decks, picked their teeth with their knives.

Captain Hartstein stood foursquare at the taffrail, bellowing down through the horn of his hands. "I'll take the first hundred and that's all, do you hear? Rest of you don't get off, I'll order all hands to put you off!"

From the salt nine southerners came low growls. They twirled their knives, they fingered their rifles, but they did not bestir themselves.

The captain ran down from the stern deck, flailed his arms, a turkey gobbler scolding wolves. "This is anarchy! I'll get the law!"

"'Tain't no use raisin' sand," one of the southerners spoke up. "More of us than they is of you. We aim to sail for Panama on this ship. No two ways about it."

Given a specific target, the captain rushed toward the speaker with upraised fist, his dewlaps purple and quivering. "Don't you try to bully me, you ruffian! I'm captain of this ship and I say it's not sailing. Not with more than a hundred of you. You can draw lots. I don't give a damn what you do. But the *Falcon* does not weigh anchor until——"

There was an ear-splitting report of gunpowder. A cloud of acrid smoke rose from the deck. When the smoke cleared, the blackened circle showed inches from the captain's planted feet.

Belle broke from the sidelines. "Why, you dirty old goat!" She slapped the gun from the southerner's hand, sprang upon

him like a crazed animal. "Kill the dear captain, would you?" she screamed, clawing. "You dirty son of a bald-headed Carlow onion!"

The southerner picked her from him like lint, set her aside, stooped to retrieve his gun, poked it back in his belt. "Stick to your knittin', ma'am. You kin lose a hand slappin' at fire-irons like that."

"Then it's your ugly face I'll slap!" She hauled off in a wide arc, smacked his cheek with the flat of her hand.

Her outburst was tinder to the passions already stirred by the lust for gold. The southerners fell upon the crew, punching and slugging, bopping heads with pans and axe handles. The crew began to sling ground tackle, beat at bodies with toggles and ropes. Seeing the crew outnumbered, the missionaries and the federal men threw themselves into the ruckus. Before long, fighting became an end in itself with few bothering to distinguish between friend and foe. Belle, self-designated guard of the captain's stout body, cracked her share of the heads that came near her, using the butt end of a swab-mop as a shillelagh.

She was about to turn the hose on the lot of them when she saw Lucius Talent mount the ladder to the stern deck. He stood for a moment outlined against the sky, top-hatted, frock-coated, bandbox fresh. "Leave it to him to steer clear of soiling his ruffles," she thought with grudging admiration. She saw him point his revolver into the sky. He fired twice.

At the explosion, all hands dropped, all eyes followed the sound to the figure in the sky. Into the quiet, Talent's voice poured like curdled cream. "It's a long way to California, gentlemen. If it's gold you're after, why not save your strength for the diggings?"

The moment of interruption had been psychologically sound. The Argonauts had purged themselves of their pent-up tensions. The sailors had released the restlessness born of days at sea. There was a churlish grumbling that petered out in the attention to wounds and the restoration of property. Realizing

he had no choice, Captain Hartstein made a brief speech of "compromise," offering to double the men up in the cabins and to rig extra hammocks where space permitted.

While the newcomers were claiming beds and stowing gear, Lucius Talent drew Belle aside.

"I've decided to take advantage of what may be the opportunity of a lifetime, Belle. I'm going on to Chagres. It would be, to borrow one of your phrases, flying in the face of God to sit around the gaming tables of New Orleans when there's a fortune of gold to be had in California. But I've written down the name of a friend of mine in the town who will look after you till you find yourself. I've asked her to give you a job in her—ah—restaurant. She's a goodhearted woman and she owes me a favour. You'll make out all right."

"That's grand of you, Mr. Talent, but I'll not be needing your chum's name nor her kindness," Belle replied with sudden decision. "I'll be off to California as well. If there's gold for the rest of you, there's gold for me."

He shook his head frowning. "There'll be hardships on the long journey. And once there, it won't be an easy life, I promise you."

"There's no easy life for the likes of me, Mr. Talent."

He shrugged. "Up to you. You're a big girl now."

"I shot up overnight then," she snapped. "Only last night I was a baby."

He grinned, chucked her chin. "Only where men are concerned. When it comes to money, you're a little Methuselah."

"I've noticed you've an eye for the main chance yourself."

"*Touché, touché.* Now, we've no time for quarrelling. We'd better see the captain before he sells our berths."

Following his heels, Belle noted that for a lounging man Lucius Talent could make dust up a road when there was reason for hurry.

They found the captain directing the installation of hammocks in the dining saloon.

"Ain't this a sight?" Hartstein complained. "To have to eat

in the same room where those filthy cotton pickers sleep is enough to turn an iron stomach. Steerage is crammed to bursting. Had to put some of them in with the livestock. Got hammocks in the hold and cots in the 'tween decks—ship looks like a floating hospital. Well, what can a man do? Must say, though, you both did what you could this afternoon. That was quick thinking, Mr. Talent, and I thank you for it. Fight had gone on much longer, we'd have no crew. And you, Belle, well, I was touched by your efforts on my behalf. Joan of Arc was never braver."

"It was a pleasure hearing the crack of those jugheads under my broomstick," Belle assured him.

When Talent apprised him of the change in their plans, Captain Hartstein proved his appreciation of their afternoon's work. "By all means, keep your cabins," he said, waving away Talent's suggestion of additional money. "Ordered the purser to charge these villains enough to make up for twenty extra fares, so think no more about it. Just take good care of this little bantam chick here. Keep her away from the swab-mops or we'll be up for court-martial when we land." They laughed and Belle dug her fists into her pockets, kicked an imaginary stone. "And any time you care to join me in my quarters for a meal," the captain went on, "be glad of the company. Believe me, the main saloon will be bedlam from now on. Meal hours will have to be changed too. Don't have enough crew to serve this mob four times a day. We'll move dinner up to six p.m. and cut out supper altogether. Though there'll always be salt beef and biscuit in the galley for you if you're hungry. Want me, Halversen?" Captain Hartstein called to his first mate who appeared in the doorway. "Coming, right away. Excuse me, folks. Lot to do. Going to try to be under way by morning."

But Captain Hartstein's estimation of departure time was optimistic. The *Falcon* was detained for several days at New Orleans, taking on mail, coal, food, water, getting clearance,

and during this time not a single Argonaut ventured ashore for fear the overloaded ship would sail without him. Even with the captain's favour, neither Belle nor Lucius Talent dared quit the ship. The southerners had used force to get aboard, and if they chose to claim squatters' rights to two of the choicest cabins aboard, the gainsayer might have a rough time of it.

The delay did not improve tempers. To the gold rushers, every day counted. The early arrivals would stake the best claims. How long could the supply last? More than four thousand, President Polk had said, were already actively engaged in mining. Thousands more were racing across the continent by stage-coach and Conestoga wagon. The overland route was the most direct but the trails were not considered "open" until April or May, and even then the dangers were incalculable: rugged mountain passes, Indian massacres, waterless desert stretches, swirling rivers to be forded, the heat of the Badlands and the cold of the Rockies, attacks from animals in trackless wilderness, to say nothing of accidents—broken wheels and axles, horses going lame, illness from exposure and exhaustion, damage or loss of food supplies. Those who could muster the money preferred to try the sea routes via Panama or Nicaragua or doubling Cape Horn, and, of these, the isthmus cutover saved enough time to warrant the risk of jungle fevers. The chances of completing the journey by water via Panama within two or three months were good, and the months saved might mean the difference between a fortune and a fiasco.

Belle's ears grew long listening to the gossip of the Argonauts. You could pick the gold out of the earth like hogs root up groundnuts, they said. They said the nuggets were clustered around grass roots waiting to be picked like berries along a road fence. And did you hear about the miner who was too lazy to wash his drawers? they said. Well, he tied them to a limb that overhung a stream, letting them dangle in the water

so the current would do his laundry for him. The next morning when he came to fish them out, lo, them drawers was gold-plated!

One night as the ship rocked off her mooring in the churning waters of the Mississippi, Belle was leaning on the rails where the tall tales were being spun when Lucius Talent tapped her shoulder. She followed him down to his cabin.

He closed the door.

Eyeing him pertly, she opened it and set one of his slippers across the jamb so that the motion of the ship would not slam the door shut. "Captain Hartstein has my solemn promise that I'll not visit your room unless the door is left ajar."

Talent raised an eyebrow, curled a lip. Except for that split second the night before when Belle's lewd talk had inflamed him in spite of his natural fastidiousness, he had never thought of her as a female, much less a desirable one. Nevertheless, the little hoyden had an uncanny flair for cards, and she had a kind of spirited vulgarity that would very likely appeal to the riffraff who would be trekking westward for gold. With a little direction from him, she might do very well as a saloon wench. Indeed, she would have to do until he could find someone more suitable. In his business it was almost impossible to work alone, and time was of the essence. Even the remainder of the sea voyage could be lucrative if she could be persuaded to fall in with his plans.

"I don't know who scares more easily—you or the captain," he said dryly, removing the slipper and closing the door. "In any case, you flatter yourself. I don't impose my passions on children. I grant the favour of them to discriminating women." He flopped on his back on the berth, stretched his legs, sighed. "Whew, I'm tired, but it's been a profitable day, all things considered. I have something serious to discuss with you, and I don't want any eavesdropping. Help me out of these boots, little one."

"Tired from getting up in the morning instead of at noon!"

she said jerking angrily at his boot. "I vow, Lucius Talent, if working was a sin, not an innocenter man than you would stand before Saint Peter on the Day of Judgment!"

"Now don't work yourself up into a temper just because I said you were a child. You'll be a woman soon enough. My pipe and the matches, sweetheart."

"Faith, you take a deal of serving," she grumbled, but she could not keep the ring out of her voice. Sweetheart! H'm. She brought him his pipe and lit it, then assumed her listening position, cross-legged on the floor at the side of his bunk. "Go on. I'm ears all over."

"Very well. Here it is. Much as I want money, I have no taste for the life of a miner. The men on this ship talk as if unlimited wealth were to be had merely for the scooping it up into canvas sacks. That's nonsense, of course. Digging is hard work. You muck around in the earth with pick and shovel till your hands are blistered and your back's bent like a crone's. Or you stand waist-high in icy mountain water panning the stream. Furthermore, the rush is only just starting. With thousands pouring into California every day, most of the gold found will go for the simple necessities of life. Everything will be scarce—food, clothing, shelter. Living will be hard."

"What if it is?" If he thought to scare her out of the chance to make her fortune, he had another think coming!

"Well, here's the way I figure it," Talent went on. "There's nothing at the isthmus now but a sleepy little village—a handful of natives—primitive huts. And Panama City's seen its best days. There's going to be a lot of traffic across that little strip of land. The men coming down the Atlantic coast from Maine to the Gulf will be as eager as the men on this ship. They'll have all the money they could raise on their land and their shops in their pockets, and while they wait for passage to the Pacific they're going to be champing with impatience. They'll want amusement—whisky—gambling. Those coming back from California will want the same. They'll have been digging their heads off, collecting gold that they can't wait to splurge

on the folks at home. Their purses will be full, their throats'll be dry, and they'll be pigeon for the company of women. Now I rather think I'd like to be the Johnny on the spot who lies back under the palms, and who without moving much, dips into the pockets of the seekers with one hand and the finders with the other. Sounds like an easy life, doesn't it?"

"You think to stay on in Panama?"

"Exactly. I'm thinking of opening a dance house there. A house of pleasure. A gambling palace. Not as fancy as the one I had in New York, of course, but a place that will tempt the traveller, with a saloon and gambling tables and dancing girls. I'll import the girls from New Orleans if I have to."

She wanted to cry out, "What about me? Take me for a dancing girl!" but she decided that he was using her as a confidante. To beg for a job from him now would demean the role. She frowned, sharpened her glance, spoke with the pompous scepticism she had seen Uncle Paddy affect when conferring with the Plug-Uglies. "Such an establishment costs a deal of money. You told me yourself that once your hat is on your head, your house is thatched."

He grinned. "True, little one, and the diamond I wear is yellow and flawed, but before this ship docks at Chagres, I'll have the capital for the venture."

"Faro?"

"Precisely."

There was silence while he crossed his bent knees, waggled his foot, sucked at his pipe and launched a wobbly ring or two through the "O" of his mouth, his tongue making tiny popping sounds. When the smoke had vanished, he addressed the ceiling languidly. "But you know, Belle, it takes two to run a good faro game. I've been thinking we might work together, you and I. You have the head and the hands for cards. You could be the dealer. I'd do all the rest—manage the business, pay and collect the bets, watch out for trickery, manipulate the case-keeper, rope in suckers. We'd be partners. On land as well as at sea. I'll teach you everything you need to know. It won't

take long if you really put your mind to it. We'll be able to start up a game as soon as the *Falcon* shoves off. Or soon after. How does it strike you?"

She sat speechless, stupefied with disbelief. Was she riding blind on a wishing horse? Surely her hopes had tricked her ears. She clamped her jaw to keep her face impassive, hugged herself to hide the accelerated rise and fall of her breast. Under her forearm she felt the lump of the watch fob inside her shirt. There was the answer—the stone! Was ever a luck-piece so almighty? *But soft, Belle McGlory, the stone whispered; before you go off like a July firecracker, remember the partnership with Uncle Paddy!*

Talent was looking at her out of the corner of his eye. After a pause she said slowly, "I don't rightly know. There's all kinds of partnerships in this world. How would you divvy the take?"

"Well, now I'm glad you asked that, Belle. Shows you look before you leap. The fact is, of course, I'm the brains of the combine. You'll only be the working arm, so to speak. And as you know, management is always more highly paid than labour. But I'm a fair man. Let's say one fourth for you, three fourths for me. How's that?"

Ah, listen to that! The dear, generous man, how could she have mistrusted him? How could the stone have compared a gentleman of the world like Lucius Talent to Uncle Paddy—a greenhorn thief that didn't know when to take his nose out of ale foam? *But soft, Belle McGlory, the stone whispered, don't go slipping into his pocket thin as a half dime.* Talent might be generous but he was no fool. If he rated her dear, then dear she must be. "What of the captain?" she stalled. "God-fearing, law-abiding man that he is, he won't put up with a crooked game on his ship, will he?"

"The captain's got a soft spot in his heart for you, Belle. And he knows you're broke. When he sees those scoundrels who forced their way on to his ship losin' their money and

you winning it, do you think he'll question the luck of the Irish?"

"Maybe not, but the scoundrels—what if they catch me thieving? On a ship there's nowhere to run to. I'd be caught like a shaggy sheep."

"Nonsense, nobody's going to catch you. Trust me. I'll train you slick as a whistle. Anyway, it's different with a woman. They might mow a man down for cheating, but a lady trickster is considered a cunning little rascal. They'd never harm you. Still, now that you mention it, there is some risk on your part. Supposing we make it one third for you, two thirds for me?"

She pressed the little stone that ticked like a clock between her breasts. She cleared her throat. "And will they all know we're partners?"

"Not on this ship, they won't. We'll let it be known that I've taught you to play just to while away the hours at sea. You and I will play in the main saloon some night when you've mastered the tricks. Then it'll all follow as naturally as sunshine after rain. They'll watch at first and then they'll want to pit their luck against yours. And gradually, we'll have a table, we'll have betters and a bank. Just leave everything to me."

"And when we get to Panama, how'll it be then?"

"Well, we'll own the place together. We'll let it be known we're partners, of course—why not? If people seek food and drink and play, they have to pay for it. And mark my words, the suckers will be fighting for the honour of losing their money to a charming young colleen from the States. The native women are nothing, you know—black and fat and ugly."

"You don't say." She closed her eyes, rocked gently on her haunches. She saw herself queenpinning it at a table heaped with greenbacks. She wore black lace mitts to deal in. Now and then she swept the hill of money into her lap with a little pearl-handled rake, and the men cheered. But her lap wasn't

big enough. Some of the dollars slid to the floor. Better to keep a bin beside her, table height. . . .

Talent coughed delicately.

"Then if we're to be a pair of rascals," Belle said, giving him the full radiance of her smile, "by the tooth of Saint Patrick, let's be rich ones!" And, unable to restrain herself a moment longer, she leaped up, and with her fists on her hips, her head awag, broke into a double-time jig.

Her elation was contagious. Talent began to clap her time and then to sing, and in the little cubicle, the silver brushes bounced on the dresser and the shaving mug muttered on the wooden shelf.

CHAPTER IV

THE "FALCON" ROCKED impotently in the bay. The men at the rails and in the saloon cursed and spat and grumbled. What was the delay? How long before this fool ship would get under way? The captain went about, glowering with frustration. Those infernal levee officers certainly took their sweet time. Damned red tape. Damned southern indolence and inefficiency. And Belle nagged like a wife. She'd learned all the humbuggery, what were they waiting for? Why couldn't they start the game tonight? She was tired of being cramped up in the stateroom, tired of sitting in the stiff-backed chair, tired of practising, of memorizing, of reciting, tired of the sight of his doll's face, his fish-cold eye, his even temper. The man was a blooming machine.

"We're losing money every minute. The ship may rest here for days to come," she'd rail.

Lucius would stifle a yawn, pat his ribs as he rose from the table. "You can fret and storm and sulk all you like, but I know the ways of human nature and you have it all to learn. We won't set up for public play till the ship is on the high seas. Don't you see, Belle, the men are ornery now, bored, idle, anxious. At best they're not what you'd call gentlemen, and God knows they're not at their best. The gold fever is eating their brains out every minute of the day. They're so on edge they'd whip out those Arkansas toothpicks they wear in their belts at the slightest provocation. Not one of them would stand for a loss. There'd be arguments and fights, yes, and corpses dropped over the side. But once this old crate starts gliding—

ah, then you'll see a difference. The men'll ease up. They'll be on their way. Nothing to do but lean back and enjoy the ride. They'll carouse and drink whisky, they'll slap each others' backs and tell racy stories. That's when they'll be ripe for plucking and not a second before." Lucius would flop full length on the bunk and polish a bracelet with a huff of breath and the heel of his hand. "Now, let's get the calls straight again. It's not enough to know how to deal, you have to know the lingo. If you're a good girl, I may have a surprise for you just before we sail. What's the big figure?"

"Oh, Lucius. You dear thing. What is it to be?"

"What's the big figure?"

"A button off your painted vest, for you've noticed my envy of it?"

"The big figure?"

"Blast you, I'm destroyed with reciting!"

A huff and a buff on the other bracelet. Implacably, "The big figure?"

She'd sigh. "King, queen, and jack."

"The little figure?"

"Ace, deuce, and three."

"Trey?"

"Trey."

"The pot?"

"Six, seven, and eight."

"Grand square?"

"King, queen, ace, and deuce. And the jack square is the jack, three—trey, I mean—four, and ten, and the nine square is nine, eight, six, and five, and I'm that hungry I could chew the bedpost and swallow the slivers. Mayn't I go for lunch?"

She was a quick study for all her impatience, and he a relentless teacher. Since, on the ship at least, Belle would be obliged to play with the same dupes night after night, it was necessary for her to master the whole bag of tricks. For, as Lucius pointed out, the more frauds employed, the less chance of any of them being detected. So the course of instruction

was intensive and tedious. First, she learned to operate the tongue-tell device concealed within the deal box. The box was slightly longer than the pack of cards and about half an inch wider. One side was open to receive the pack and in the opposite side was an opening large enough to let one card out. By delicately pressing the centre of the top plate, a concealed spring widened the aperture sufficiently to allow two cards to be drawn out into the dealer's control, thus increasing chances for "doublets" which won half of the stakes for the bank. The cards had to be carefully trimmed for this box imposture, and for hand dealing as well, and now Belle could understand why Lucius Talent's hands were so smooth and well cared for. A fine sense of touch was needed to discern prepared cards. The "strippers" were trimmed so that a portion of the deck was wide across the middle and slightly tapered at the ends, the other portion being hollowed a little in the middle and widening slightly to the ends. The portions could then be arranged so that one half would win and one half would lose, and cutting the deck nowise altered the result. Then there were the "readers"—cards with minute flaws in the patterns on their backs or cards marked with pin pricks for reading by the tips of the fingers. And there were the "sanders," whose backs were roughened by rubbing with pumice stone or with a mixture of resin and glass, or sandpapered, so that any two could be made to stick together.

With the marked, stripped, or sanded cards, Belle learned to stack the pack, and by using them in the crooked dealing box, she could make splits appear at will. She could deal two cards at a time so that the sharpest opponent would think he had received only one. She could deal a card to lose when there was heavy play on it to win, and arrange the last turn to her advantage.

In case of complaint, Lucius warned, she was to offer the bank to the challenger. The apparent fairness of such a proposal would soothe the whole company of players as well as the disgruntled loser. Before turning over the dealing box,

however, a slight pressure to the right of centre moved a screw which locked the illegal contrivance. With the box 'turned honest, Belle still had the advantage of knowing the marks on the cards, and could continue to win easily as banker or as better.

Now and then, seeing that she'd reached the limit of her attention span, Lucius would take her for a turn about the deck or to the saloon for a soft drink. He did nothing to discourage the general assumption that he and Belle were in the throes of a shipborne romance. What other inference could be drawn from their constant companionship, and if the dapper gambler and the volatile fresh-faced young tomboy seemed ill-assorted, who could account for the vagaries of love? Even the captain, with whom they dined at night, was taken in. Not that Belle set out to deceive. She was by turns roguish and worshipful because that was the way she felt about Lucius. She found herself alternately loving and hating him, not romantically perhaps, but the way one loves and hates a superior being on whom one is dependent. And Lucius' absorption in his protégé was easily mistaken for a lover's possessiveness.

"Your fork in your right hand, Belle. And hold it like a pencil, not like a trowel."

"Leave me be, can't you?"

"I thought you wanted me to correct your table manners."

"It's the nasty way you have of correcting." Mimicking his drawl, "Not like a trowel."

"There, there," the captain would put in paternally.

And Lucius would cast a remorseful smile at Belle's bent head. He'd lift her chin, dab at her mouth with his napkin. "I'm sorry, little one. Forgive me?"

The joy of being needed, of being soothed by parent-teacher-god-and-clotheshorse would clear Belle's face instantly so that Captain Hartstein, describing it later to Halversen in the wheelhouse, sounded almost wistful. "It's a long time since my wife and I were that wrapped up in each other. He doesn't

let her out of his sight, fusses over her every minute. They have little tiffs at the table—little love-tiffs—till she's on the brink of tears. Then he says one soft word to her and she lights up like a Christmas tree. Still, they're not what you'd call a good match. She's only a child, ignorant of the ways of the world. And gentleman though he seems, he is a gambler. You know the saying, 'Just as a good rnan can't be a cheat, so a cheat can't be a good man.' "

"What makes you sure he cheats?" Halversen asked, giving the wheel a light flip to course.

"Faro's his game, ain't it?"

"No way to play faro honest?"

"Odds for the bank are only two to one. So they tell me anyway. Don't play cards myself. Always worked too hard for my money to be willing to wager it."

"Me too. You think he's hooked her, do you?"

"Don't think, know." The captain sighed. "I'd rest easier if it were one of the missionaries she'd taken up with. Or even one of those government chaps. Well, I suppose he's given her a lot of big talk. And plenty of kisses no doubt. Poor little thing—she'll soon find out there's a difference between selling bad eggs and cooking them."

"She might be a bad egg herself."

The captain's eyes squinted at the horizon, and remembering Belle's story of the watch, he smiled. "Might be, but her heart's in the right place. Fought like a demon when that cotton-pickin' polecat took a potshot at me. She's a spunky little thing, and I wish her all the best."

On the fifth day of the *Falcon's* lay-to, there was fresh cause for impatience. Another ship, the *Isthmus*, steamed into port, its paddle wheel churning brown soapsuds, its guardrails studded with passengers. The levee opposite the *Isthmus'* anchorage was soon thronged with bearded desperadoes clamouring for passage. Fascinated by the re-enactment of their own show, the *Falcon's* Argonauts stayed glued to the rails, smug in the knowledge that they at least had a ship under

them. And then, as they watched, a second dockside drama began to unfold.

A tall, top-hatted frock-coated young man was directing four sturdy blacks as they attempted to load a hand printing press on a flat barge. The men watching estimated that the press must weigh a thousand pounds or more.

"What's he want to take that for?" they queried. "Can't dig for gold with a printing press."

"He's no fool," the captain said, focusing his binoculars. "Be a big demand for news in those frontier towns. Bet he makes more money selling papers to you diggers than you do. That is, if he and that machine get there at all."

The Negroes were paddling now. The barge wobbled under its burden, steadied again, slowly came alongside the *Isthmus*. Two of the Negroes swung aboard. With help from the sailors, they tried to manœuvre the ship's hook under the cable rope that was tied around the press. But before the hook could grab the rope, the barge tilted. The press slid off, ponderous as an old alligator, sank quietly out of sight.

"Ah, the poor thing!" Belle cried, grabbing the binoculars from the captain.

"Who—the press or the owner?"

"The gentleman, of course," Belle retorted. "A crying shame. And him as pretty a Goliath as ever I saw."

The men laughed.

"A woman for you. She wouldn't give a tinker's damn for the whole performance if the 'gentleman' was old and fat."

"Too bad he ain't coming on this ship," the captain taunted. "Handsome young fella like that around, Belle might lose her taste for card games."

Now the young man under discussion was peeling off his clothes.

"Will you look at his muscles?" Belle exclaimed.

"How can we? You've got the glasses."

"Lookie—he's dove in!"

"Good thing he kept his pants on."

The young man swam with a powerful overarm stroke to the *Isthmus*' side. A sailor threw him a grappling hook and a piece of towrope. He disappeared with both under water for what seemed a long time. Then his head surfaced, and he beckoned. The darkies dived in, each laying hold of the towrope, and the five of them swam the cumbersome piece to the edge of the shore. One of the Negroes ran up on the sand, braced his feet, leaning back from his hold on the rope so that the press should not backslide. The others swam out again to fetch the barge. But the sucking pull of the press was too much for one man. The rope slid out of the Negro's grasp, and the press stuck fast in the shallows.

Lunch time aboard the *Falcon* came and went. No one stirred from the rails. Lucius went about among the men organizing a ship's pool. Only Belle and the captain and a couple of the Argonauts held out for the young man, the odds being in favour of the press.

"How can you wager, Belle?" Captain Hartstein asked. "I understood that you were temporarily out of funds."

"And so I am, Captain. I was just stating my views."

"I'll back the little lady," Lucius said. "But you, Captain, I thought you never risked money."

"No, I'll not risk money, but if that Goliath wins out against nature before sundown, I'll stand the ship's company an extra round of ale, by God, I will."

One by one, the bargemen gave up. They dragged themselves out of the water on all fours. One fell spent on the beach. The other three disappeared into the crowd. And then the spectators were treated to one those rare feats of strength and stubbornness that Americans, who love a hero, soon sing into legend.

The young Goliath carried a plank of wood from the beach and set an end of it under the sunken press. He pulled the raft about and dropped its stone anchor alongside the plank. Then with a harsh bark that reverberated across the sea, he threw his full weight against the high end of the plank, forced down

steadily until the press rose and then toppled, water pouring from its sides, on to the giddy barge. A cry went up from the crowds on land and on sea. The young man floated face down on the water, resting. The barge quieted as did its cargo. Then the young giant swam the barge carefully, slowly, smoothly to the ship. The hoist swung the bulk of metal to the deck. Cheers ripped the sun-struck silence. Hats flew over ships' rails, sat bobbing the water like so many ducks.

"There's a man don't take no!"

"By God and by golly——"

"Never forget—long's I live!"

And they wouldn't. Within the hour, the hero's name would be on their lips—Jim Rideout. By the same mysterious folk-telegraph, they would know whence he came and where he was bound and what for. "Newspaper fella from Beantown. Gonna start a paper in California. San Francisco ain't got one yet, I guess. Or if they have, they're sure gonna have another. This Rideout, he don't fool!"

By sundown the levee swarmed with townsfolk who had heard of the epic struggle and who came now like pilgrims to see not the hero, long since gone, but merely the site.

The sky was still streaked with the mauves and pinks of the southern sunset when the *Falcon's* engine began to pump at last. The paddle wheel splashed, the furnace sent out sprays of sparks, the machinery clanked, the stacks smirched the faintly starred sky with columns of black smoke. The sea flowed by, slowly if you watched the receding shore, quickly if you looked down the ship's side. Darkly breathing, it filled the eye and the heart, a powerful presence that impinged on the least sensitive consciousness, evoking at once humility and hope.

The Argonauts, having cheered themselves hoarse—first at the raising of the press and then at the raising of the *Falcon's* anchor—left the rails to heal their throats with the cautery of whisky. They filled the main saloon with their excited talk until the sound of the sea was only a distant drum.

Meanwhile in Belle's cabin jubilation prevailed for other reasons.

Beside a gaping steamer trunk, Belle stood knee deep in gowns, shawls, petticoats, pelegines, shine of ribbon, froth of lace, feathers and flowers and bows. Nothing had been forgotten. There were slippers and mitts and bonnets and boots and even the necessary unmentionables—lawls chemisettes and frilled pantalettes and stockings of both white cotton and pink silk. The heaps of gowns, reds and yellows, pinks and violets and blues in riotous combinations, made a garden around her, a summer show.

"But Lucius, I can't believe it. I can't, I can't, I can't! When—how did you manage it, with me glued to your side every minute of the day? Surely you never slipped out to the shore in the dark of the moon, you with your love for your sleep?"

Lucius sat on the table, trimming his cuticle with finely ground scissors. He always carried manicuring instruments in his pocket, and he was in the habit of bringing the file or the buffer or the scissors out at odd times to make repairs. It was an emotional outlet similar in its release to pipe smoking, and now it served to hide the pleasure he took in Belle's gratification. Actually, he revelled in the Lord Bountiful role, perhaps because his own father had been so ungenerous—cold and stingy and sadistic at home, and on Sundays in the pulpit a mouth breather of hell's fire. Frivolous things, clothes, jewellery, music—had been forbidden not as extravagances but as sins, and so Lucius valued them now, perhaps overvalued them as symbols of rebellion, and hid the intensity of his rebellion behind a veneer of casualness. "However did you manage it?" she raved, and he surveyed his nail beds and answered off-handedly, "Oh, it was quite simple really. I sent a note by one of the sailors to a certain lady in town. She's a good friend who has always been most—ah—accommodating. I described your colouring and your size and she seems to have shopped well, doesn't she? And notice, please—every gown of silk, which is

the mark of a lady." He pointed to a shawl with the toe of his boot. "Feel that—soft as a cobweb. Pure cashmere. And that other mantle—the fringed one. Paisley. Very chic. Now you see why I wasn't in a great hurry to shove off. It might have been months before the stuff arrived on the next ship. The length looks right as you hold it up, but you'll have to try them on. Won't they slip down off your shoulders; for they look—if you'll pardon the observation—a bit roomy in the bodice?"

"Oh, no, they're perfect, each one." Her chin squeezed against her clavicle as she inspected her feminine endowments. "I wouldn't have them any different—not for the world."

"Indeed?" The amusement in his voice made her look up and she saw the cocked eyebrow and the focus of his eyes.

She blushed. "I—I mean the frocks, you redshank! Ah, Lucius, they're grander than dreams. And this one—yellow, the very colour of primroses, and sprigged all over! I'll just stuff the tops with napkins. Or maybe I'll grow into them. But how did you pay for them? Your purse must have a wide throat!"

He flipped his shirt frill. "A diamond, even a poor one, is a good friend providing it's large enough. It replenished my wardrobe as well."

"You sold your spark!" Belle cried, aghast. She threw her arms about him. "And I thought you were centred on yourself. Oh, I despise myself for my low opinions!"

Lucius gently disengaged himself, puffed his crushed frill with his little finger. "Your opinions are often quite sound, little one, and in this case unerring. My generosity was dictated solely by my business instincts. You look less than irresistible in those worn pantaloons, and if you're to attract the pigeons——"

She put a finger across his lips. "May the Lord God of Heaven help you, Lucius. When you're not crying yourself up, you're crying yourself down. Don't you dare belittle this grand

and good deed! It's the happiest moment of my life and you're to thank. Never you fear," holding a stiff violet brocade to her waist with splayed hands, "I'll be as fetching a creature as ever you saw now I've got the whfewithal. As for the pigeons, how's this for the way to lure them?" And she bounced on the balls of her feet, head lolling, shoulders and hips rolling, as she had seen the chippies strut for customers at Murphy's.

"A bit broad for my taste," he remarked dryly and he pinched her waggling backside.

"Ouch—you nicky!" She rubbed the place, backed away. "Is that any way to treat a lady?" But in the next second she was rummaging through the pile again. "Which'll it be tonight—the red or the pink or the dear, dear yellow? And won't the captain be knocked to his knees when he claps an eye on me?"

Lucius picked up his cane and his hat. "Well, I'll leave you to your self-love. I think the captain will survive the sight. I doubt that a few feathers will make you such a shocker as all that."

She was, as usual, meat for his grinder. She ran to the mirror, peered anxiously. "Why not? Except for these blasted freckles, I'm pretty. Don't you think me pretty, Lucius?"

"What difference does it make whether I think so or not? It's money we want, isn't it? You've got the head for making money, I'm sure of that."

She turned from the mirror, stamped her foot. "Just you wait, Lucius. Just wait and see how I turn all the gents into Billy Noodles!"

He consulted his watch. "I'll wait no more than one hour. I'll rap on your door. You'll find a box of rice powder in the trunk somewhere, but use it sparingly. And do something about your hair, Belle, will you? You might try washing it, for instance. In fact, a full bath might be——"

"Ohhhh!"

He dodged the pillow she threw at his head, left jauntily with a laugh.

He let himself into his own cabin. The silence, the orderliness was like a dash of cold water. It was as if her door had closed away all the youth and the joy there was in the world. He felt oddly impoverished, dejected, worthless. To fortify himself, he took a few pulls at the bottle of brandy, began to dress for dinner. But he sat for a long time with a shoe in his hand. He stood before the mirror with a razor while the soap dried on his face. How transported she had been, how ecstatic—a dynamo of expressed emotion! All because of a box of clothes. Like his mother, who could swoon over a bunch of grubby violets, a locket, a painted fan.

Looking back, he could understand his mother's seeking comfort in a lover's arms. But he had been only twelve years old when he had caught her out. In that shattering moment of discovery, he had not realized it was his father who was being betrayed. He had thought with a youngster's confusion about such matters that it was himself. He had run away from home that night. Before he left, however, he had placed at the bedside of his little brother, a box containing his worldly goods. He smiled now, recalling the contents of the box—items which in some form or other have been valued by small boys since the son of Adam. A knife, a sealing ring, a dog's stump tail, a whistle, a ball of hoarded string, a carved ship, keys that fitted no locks, sticks and stones, a spinning top. Even the glass tubes of ill-smelling concoctions that comprised his alchemy set, he left behind.

But in spite of the offering, he was never able to think of his brother without an ache of remorse. His mother and his brother, he had deserted them both, robbed them of himself, so that giving now—to anyone—was an expiation, a bitter-sweet self-indulgence. So that when he gave a trunkful of dresses to a young waif, he must punish too, refusing to say she was pretty, calling her dirty. . . .

He was at the brandy bottle again when his door rattled.

"For the love of Mike, Lucius, what's keeping you? Am I fit to be tied!"

He swallowed the burning stuff, made a face, opened the door.

She posed, framed by the doorway, her eyes sprout-green in a face as white as blanched almond, her shoulders pearly above the lace bertha, her waist tiny above the lampshade skirt, her hands reduced to doll size by the large pagoda sleeves. Anticipating his gasp, she gasped. Anticipating his expression, her eyes widened and her lips parted in wonder. But Lucius' forehead pinched in a frown and his eyes fixed on the beach pebble which she had strung on a black velvet ribbon and tied about her throat.

"Where in God's name did you get that?" he demanded, drawing her roughly inside.

Her hands flew to cover it. "Lucius Talent, you're enough to make a green stone cry. All this moiling and toiling to doll myself up, and then all you've got to say is——"

"Answer me!"

"It's nothing but a fob I found in the gutter one day," she said, wringing her hands. "But I had no necklace and I felt so naked up top——"

"Let me see it."

She jumped back, her skirts billowing with the sudden movement. "Oh, no, I dassn't. I'll not give it up to you. It has a power over me!"

"Nonsense, let me see it. I'll give it right back, you little fool."

Reluctantly she untied the ribbon and dropped the stone in his palm. She crossed her fingers behind her back as he examined it with a monocle that he screwed into his eye.

After a moment he looked up, eyed her with flinty admiration. "I'm damned. I've never seen one this size. It's a black pearl. Fabulous—why a pearl like this is probably worth two or three thousand. Maybe more."

"Dollars?" The last syllable rose to a scream.

"Not pea beans, little one, not pea beans."

But the wonder went from her eyes in a flash, and she

snatched the pearl from his hand, held it behind her back. "Not a penny will it buy for me. I tell you my life's locked in it. Without it, I'll snuff out like a candle."

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody told me," she said solemnly. "It came to me like a law. Maybe it was whispered in my ear by the little people, I couldn't say for sure. Some say it's according to the time you were born whether or not you've an ear for their wee-noising. I was born on Good Friday and baptized Easter Sunday, so I can hear them plain as day."

"Wee-noising," he echoed, shaking his head. "Well, wear it by all means."

"You haven't yet said how do I look."

But the brandy had chased away the ghosts. He was himself again, hard-shelled.

"You look," he said, "like you've been sugaring doughnuts. Come, let's wash your face. It was my mistake to have included rice powder in the order. Your skin is healthy and young. You don't need the stuff and you certainly don't know how to put it on."

"Have a care—don't splash my gown!" She raised her face obediently to the cloth he'd wrung out. "And why did I find those ugly brown shirts and breeches at the bottom of the trunk? I won't be wearing trousers again, I'll kiss the book on that!"

"Better not. You'll be glad to have them in the tropics. You think you could straddle a mule in those skirts?"

"They are," she admitted, "a bit awkward to sit down in. I've been practising the while on the chair. But oh, Lucius," she pirouetted away from him, "don't you think the primrose suits me grand?"

"Yes, because your skin is tanned from promenading the decks. Normally, blue or green will be more flattering. It'll bring out the colour of your eyes."

"And you should see underneath! I've got as good as what shows!"

The gold eyebrow went up again.

Her face flamed. "I—mean the underwear—oh you——?"

"Yes, I know. Well, come along. I'm hungry. Here, you've left your shawl."

She sighed and let him drape her bare shoulders and she followed him out.

If Lucius was close with a compliment, the rest of the ship's company was not. As the only woman on the boat, Belle was bound to receive attention, but as a vivacious young girl who had changed in a day from urchin to Cinderella, she was a sensation. The captain danced attendance, refilling her plate until her bodice felt like a cement wall and she feared for the seams. Later, when she entered the main saloon, the men's voices stopped as if on signal; their tankards froze halfway to their lips. They exhaled "Ohs" and inhaled whistles, they bowed and they toasted her with whisky and song. She minced about, holding her handkerchief as if it were wet. One of the Mississippians lifted her to the bar counter, his forefingers meeting at the back of her waist and his thumbs in front.

"Give out with that banjo, Duke," someone called, and one of the men began to pick out the new tune she'd been hearing ever since New Orleans. Belle danced along the counter, heel-toe-tapping to the darkie melody, listening intently for the words, and after one chorus from the banjo player, she belted it back in her own throaty Irish brogue.

*"It rained all night the day I left,
The weather it was dry,
The sun so hot I froze to death,
Oh, brothers, don't you cry.*

*Oh, Susannah, oh don't you cry for me,
For I'm off to Californiyay,
My washbowl on my knee."*

One after another the lusty adventurers contributed a verse, improvised on the spot. They sang of the girls they'd left be-

hind and the gold they'd left them for. They sang anything that came into their heads, anything that was on their minds.

*"I seen a lad from Bostontown
As big as any tree
With his first and second digits
He could lift both you and me.*

*Sing Jim Rideout, the hero of the day,
For he's off to Californee
And he's swimmin' all the way!"*

A simple tune, as easy on the tongue as an old shoe on a foot. It had netted its composer, Stephen Foster, a hundred dollars and it had caught the ear of the plantation folk, boss-man and field hand alike. Now the forty-niners, who had to sing or burst with the promise of gold, picked it up, took it for their own.

Hour after hour, the singing continued. Belle, in her glory, gave out with an uninhibited repertoire—gay songs, bawdy songs, salty songs, tear-jerkers—and the communal choruses were loud with male approval.

At last the snores of those who had fallen into the hammocks reminded the wassailers that the hour was late. Led by Lucius, Belle took her leave of what was undoubtedly as unique a coming-out party as any daughter of New York ever had.

Lucius opened the door of her stateroom, struck a match to the lamp. He opined that she had done a good night's work.

Belle put her flushed face to the porthole, looked out on the midnight sky powdered with the stars of the Mexican Gulf. "If this is work," she sighed, "what in the world is play?"

He came to her side, leaned his head close to hers and her heart skipped a wide heavy beat. But he only sniffed her hair. "Surprising what a little soap and a few ribbons will do. Might be a good idea in the future to lock your door at night."

"Could it be yourself you don't trust, Lucius Talent?"

"Cocky little witch, aren't you? No, you have nothing to

fear from Uncle Lucius, but I'm not sure about some of those hillbillies. After all, you are the only woman aboard. And those roughnecks threw down a lot of whisky. We don't want any trouble. There are fish to be fried."

"So it's the whisky and me being the only woman aboard that might spoil the fish, is it?"

"Now look—you got enough attention tonight without trying to wheedle more out of me. Just don't let it turn your head. Tonight their hearts, tomorrow their money, eh, little one?"

The new finery lay where she stepped out of it. She blew out the light, fell face down on the bed. She was just dropping off to sleep when she heard her name called.

"Miss Belle!"

She sat up, held her breath, wide-eyed in the dark.

"Miss Belle, honey, open up. It's someone wants to be your friend."

There was a sudden hissing and scuffling, a crack, a groan, a thud. And then Lucius' voice. "Now, get up, you clown. Skedaddle before I lose my temper."

She heard first the one go—clumping—and then the other—lightly; catstepping. She heard the throb of the engine. The intermittent tramp of boots. The swish-lick of the water against the running ship. She tossed and turned, lost now to sleep. To be dressed up and desired, fought over and protected! She closed her hand around the pearl under her pillow. Its magic was beginning to work.

CHAPTER V

THE NIGHTLY FARO games in the main saloon became the lifeblood of the voyage. Dealt by Belle, managed with utmost finesse by Lucius, dourly permitted if not sanctioned by Captain Hartstein, the trimming of the gold rushers, civil service men, and not a few missionaries took place gradually but systematically. There were enough intermittent bank losses to lull the unsophisticated group, and since some two hundred players were in and out of the game, no one could keep tabs on the amounts that eventually accrued to the winsome dealer. The betting became so heavy and the players so numerous that Talent's set of chips was not nearly adequate, but there was a large supply of corn in the hold, and with the captain's permission, they shelled several ears and used kernels for chips.

There were nights when a player had a phenomenal run of "luck," and of this he boasted at the rails the following day at such length that his fellows were more inclined to commiserate with the gallant young banker than to congratulate her opponent. And pride, that expensive virtue, stilled the tongues of the losers. So the general impression was the tiger's favour fell impersonally according to its own ineluctable whim, with perhaps a slight edge toward Belle whose luck was clearly laced with skill and daring.

Lucius, having learned to temper greed with caution on the floating palaces of the Mississippi, where the bodies of sharpers were dumped overboard as unceremoniously as garbage, saw to it that no man was stripped clean. From the spying operation of the cabin steward who was now in his pay, he learned

the extent of each passenger's purse, and he kept careful records of their losses and gains. Under his tutelage, Belle put certain curbs on the plungers, stipulating running limits when the game threatened to become disastrous for any one individual and awarding the privilege of going paroli—or parlaying his winnings—when a player was in the hole. She played with a sporting good humour, soothing her opponent with a natural coquettishness that pampered rather than threatened his manhood. And, again thanks to her mentor, she soon acquired a reputation for generosity because of a few quixotic gestures. For example, more than one reckless player had found in an envelope under his door or pillow or stuck in his gear, a refund of half of his losses of the previous night. This, since it beggared the teller, was not boasted of but rather confided so that the story passed all the more quickly from mouth to mouth.

Thus, according to Lucius' careful plan, the "fleeing of the golden-fleecers" went apace.

And then one night the device on the dealing box baulked. A gadget is, after all, only a gadget.

Belle was sitting at the head of the table, and the scene was very much as she had imagined it during the long hours of practice off New Orleans. There was the coterie of young men, there was the money stacked in neat piles at almost every painted card on the layout. There was the golden-haired Lucius at her elbow with the casekeeper before him. And she, limelighted and centre-staged, in fuchsia watered silk with pink velvet looped around her sun-bronzed shoulders, the side pannier ribbons of pink velvet cushioning her elbows as she sat dealing. At her throat, strung on a narrow band of pink velvet ribbon, was the black pearl which had become a regular part of her evening costume, for she and Lucius had agreed to use it as a signal. In case of mishap, she was to cry out, "Ring-adora!" as if she was exclaiming over her luck, and at the same time touch the pearl. She had not thus far had to employ the device. But now for all her careful pressing, only one card at a time slid out of the opening at the side of the dealing box,

and as it came, her ears detected a slight scraping noise. Normally the noise of play and comment would have screened out the tiny sound, but the bank had lost the last three turns, the betting had gone suddenly heavy, and suspense had spread an umbrella of quiet over the faro table. Alerted by the hush, cliques of drinkers had swarmed over from the bar, stood rubber-necking over the shoulders of the players. Belle could hear herself breathe.

Lucius smiled over the rim of his highball. "They're out to get you this time, Belle. I wouldn't want to be in your little party slippers, no sirree! Sixty, sixty-five—I see seventy-five dollars riding against the queen of spades alone! Bets all down? Any more to say the bank won't win?"

Wouldn't he shut up his barking? She couldn't think what to do.

"Keep cool," Lucius had often warned. "If you have cause for alarm, take a moment to think." Think? Her brains had gone soft as water-soaked bread. Oh, it was quiet in the blasted room. And hot as hades too. The flame hardly flickered in the lantern. Only the faintest throb of the engine under her feet to remind that this was a ship and that there was no avenue of escape except a watery one.

"Wheel 'em and deal 'em, sugar!"

"Yeah, fork up, ma'am. We're gettin' right high-strung!"

Belle milked the slot, one finger on the top centre of the box. There was the slight scrape and she gave a little cough to cover it. The card showed. The queen of spades.

The men roared their triumph.

"Ringadora!" Belle cried, clutching the pearl.

Lucius' highball glass dropped from his fingers. The liquid spilled down the centre of the table, slowed by the sucking baize. The puddle spread, reaching into greenbacks, lapping the chip stacks, floating the corn kernels. "Whoops! Sorry!" Lucius was on his feet, his silk handkerchief in his hand.

"Hey, watch it, man!"

"Don't touch the bets!"

"Be calm, gentlemen," Lucius advised. "Nobody's going to move anything. Everyone will get paid off." As he mopped, he leaned toward Belle.

"Box stuck!" she hissed into his ear. In her agitation she had tugged too hard at the pearl. The bow now came undone, the ribbon fell on the table, the pearl rolled to the floor.

Belle jumped up. "My stone! My life stone! Oh, please, we must find it!"

There was a scrape of chairs. Several of the men knelt; hands scrabbled over the floor.

Lucius took the opportunity to knock the box, rather gently, to the seat of Belle's chair. Some of the cards spilled.

"Oops! There goes the game, gentlemen. The box fell. Never mind. Belle still pays off on the queen of spades."

"Here you are, sugar. Here's your stone. Rolled clear over to the spittoon."

Belle's joy over the retrieved ornament was visibly genuine. She flung her arms around the Mississippian who had found it, kissed him, kissed the stone, praised everyone's gallantry as she strung the pearl on the ribbon and tied it around her neck. Meanwhile, Lucius scrupulously and swiftly paid Belle's debts from her bank. The whole company moved to the bar for nightcaps. Pleased with their winnings, the men talked genially of the evening's accidents, of other phenomenal wins, of the power of amulets.

After a decent interval, Lucius and Belle bade the party a leisurely good night.

In the privacy of Talent's stateroom, the dealing box was repaired in a matter of moments.

"All it needed was a drop of oil," Lucius explained, testing and retesting the performance of the spring. "The sea air is hard on fine metal contrivances."

Belle rocked, white-faced, on the edge of his bunk. "Ah, God in heaven, I thought I was a goner!"

"Nonsense, I've told you the men will never hurt you. Still,

it was a bad moment. Your pettifoggery with the pearl gave us time. Your acting was superb. I was proud of you."

"Acting? Acting wasn't in it. When the stone fell away, the very breath went out of my body!"

"You mean you didn't drop it purposely?"

"Would I slit my own windpipe?"

They looked at each other for a moment in the blankness of reorientation, and then they burst out laughing. They laughed till they ached, till Belle rolled on the floor, pounding it with her fists, till the nervous tension of the gaming table was purged, leaving them limp.

"Ah, you're a dilly, Belle," Lucius said, shaking his head. He reached for his handkerchief. It was still wet, reeked of whisky. He tossed it to her, and it set them off again.

"The captain'll hear us!" Lucius gasped. "He'll think I've plied you with drink!"

The mention of the captain sobered her. "It would scald my heart to be disgraced before the captain. He thinks of me as a dear honest girl as maybe I would be if I'd had a father the likes of him."

Lucius was unimpressed by the flare of conscience. "If you were a dear honest girl you wouldn't be the sole owner of a thousand dollars tonight despite the evening's losses."

Belle's eyes were green marbles. "A thou—— You're blathering!"

"Blathering, as you must know by now, is not my habit." He took a sheet of paper from the top bureau drawer. It was covered with neat columns of figures, and he pointed to the numbers at the bottom under a black line. "The total take to date: three thousand. And what's more, every man jack who gets off this ship will have roughly half of what he started out with still jingling in his pocket."

Belle made a breeze with her skirts in the middle of the floor. Suddenly the wind died. "Where've you hidden the money? What if somebody stole it?"

"Not a chance. It's in the captain's safe. He's keeping it buttoned up just for you."

"Is he, the dear thing!"

"It's not a fortune, but it's all we dare take on this ship. We'll all be poling down the Chagres River in less than a week and I have no wish to be food for the crocodiles. Three thousand will easily start us in business in Panama, and so I suggest we knock off now, call a halt. I suggest we moon at the rails for the next few nights. Let the suckers play their own game if they want to."

"Is it that you think I've lost my nerve because of the frish-frash tonight?"

"Well, have you?"

"Lucius Talent, the way I feel is," she said, throwing back her head, "with your great brain and my black pearl, a March hare couldn't catch us!"

"Good girl. But pearl or no pearl, I don't believe in pushing one's luck. We'll play till the end of the journey if you like. But we'll play for fun. We'll play the game honestly from here to Chagres."

"Oh, no. We might lose."

"We came away with two hundred tonight after paying off the last snap. That's velvet. We'll play with that—sixty-five for you, a hundred and thirty-five for me." A smile played about Lucius' lips, softened his eyes, and he looked for a moment like a man in love. "I have a kind of longing to buck the tiger."

Belle shrugged. Faro was to her, not a personal proving ground, but a means of livelihood. She said warningly, "But when the velvet's gone, we quit. Will you agree to that, Lucius?"

"Of course," he said, but his glance was inward, and she, who trusted Lucius implicitly in a cheating game, felt a twinge of fear of him in an honest one.

Within two nights of play, her fear proved prophetic. When Lucius lost his share, she willingly turned over to him her own doubled velvet (hadn't he sold his flasher to buy her all those

grand clothes?), but when he lost that and asked for more, she was adamant.

There had never been a time when Lucius had not been able to bend a woman—mother, nurse, patron, mistress—to his will. In an agony of frustration, he sought Belle out in her cabin after the midday meal.

"You've got to tell the captain to open the safe for me, Belle. That money is lying idle. I can make it work. I'll recoup my losses and replace the loan and have some to spare. I can't miss, I tell you. My luck's ripe to turn."

Belle sat hunched on the trunk, her arms crossed over her thudding breast. He'd been after her all the morning. Over and over again. "You've got to ask the captain, you've got to give me the money." She was sick and tired of the sight and sound of him, but she could sense the violence rising up in him, and she was afraid. Flouting Aunt Kate or Uncle Paddy had been child's play compared to standing up to Lucius Talent. He wouldn't give up, wouldn't take no. Well, by the saints, no more would she.

"And where's the affidavit," she asked, "to vouch for the turn of your luck?"

"It's mathematical, I tell you. The law of averages. You don't comprehend these things, Belle, but you must respect my intelligence and my experience. All I ask is a hundred dollars. And not from your share of the savings. From *mine*!" He snorted. "My God, here I am pleading like a schoolboy for my own money. And there you sit like some power-drunk harpy refusing it. It's a joke, really. Only the joke's on me and I find it hard to laugh."

"Now, Lucius, keep your toe in your pump. You've nicked me already and what's done is done, but not another penny will I shell out."

"Fifty, Belle. Have a heart."

"I'd as soon toss it overboard. Feed the fishes."

"Twenty, then. A measly twenty, and I—Harry, I never begged before in my life!"

"Not another tenner."

He lowered his face to hers, his jaws hard. "Why don't you castrate me, you little shrew, and be done with it?"

She drew back. She had no idea what he meant by that last, but every nerve end in her body ached to end the altercation, to see him smile again, to see him master of himself, and of her. "I've said my say," she whispered, and she licked her lips.

He flung her a look of hatred, then ignored her altogether as he paced springily, up and down, back and forth, in the little cell. The silence became electric with doom. It was only a matter of time, she felt, so many steps, so many bounces until he figured out how to dispose of her. Her fingers closed hard on her arms as she waited for him to turn and spring. But she was forgetting that Lucius Talent was not a man of simple violence.

He put his hand on the knob of the door. "Then that's your last word, is it? You won't help me out?"

"I'd have the heart of a chicken if I let you lose our nest egg," she said doggedly. "Though you murder me in my bed, that's my last word."

A tight smile tweaked the waxed tips of his moustache, and she waited for the blow. It would come now, she knew, with the smile. "Well, since the money's to do me no good, I see no reason for keeping our guilty little secret any longer. I believe I'll inform the good captain of the nature of your work."

She gasped. "You never would."

"Why not?"

"Because you'd hang yourself as well. Everybody knows the equipment is yours. It takes two to cheat at faro."

"Oh, he won't do anything rash. Maybe forbid further card playing, that's all. He can't expose me without throwing you to the lions. But just think how saddened he'll be to hear that you, the apple of his eye—"

Belle sprang off the trunk, stood up to him with her fists planted on her hips, her face pugged under his. "So it's black-

mail, is it?" she blazed with the illogic of the honest thief. "Then tattle to the captain and may your tongue turn black in your doll's head! For now that I know the measure of your puny soul, Lucius Talent, I want no more dealings with you. You talk of hearts—why, you've got no more heart than you'd junk on a tombstone. Now get along with you, away out of my sight! Get out or I'll cream you out!"

"Ah—go to hell!"

He slammed out.

"And send you my ashes as snuff!" she screamed, her head in the door. "And wouldn't I laugh to see you sneezing!"

Her fishwife curses followed him down the deck. He sensed the stir and the sniggering at the rails. Pride held his steps down to a walk. Then he disappeared into his cabin like a gopher into a hole.

Belle's sobs rent the air between the drowsing sky and the cat-napping sea. The men at the rails left off their game of pot-shotting the revolving dolphins. "Love," they said, and they winked at each other. "She's a hot one, regular Jezebel," they said, and they rolled their eyes and smirked at each other. After a while, quiet settled down on their backs again. The sun-warmed quiet lay on their shoulders like the arm of a sleeping woman. The men were silent, scanning the horizon with private remembering eyes.

CHAPTER • VI

BELLE WOKE FROM the deep sleep into which she had flung herself after the quarrel. The Honduras sunset sprayed with pink gold the clothes she had hurled about in her sobbing rage. Through the open porthole came the gentle breath of the south-eastern trades, the measured hiss of the waves, and, regular as the human heart, the muffled beat of the engine. She flexed her body, luxuriating in the privacy that permitted sleeping in nothing but one's pelt. Wouldn't Aunt Kate turn myrtle in the face if she could see her now, lying naked as a pagan, wiggling her toes in the pink light of a foreign sky? She yawned and scratched her head hard with both hands and fell back on the pillow. Ah, wasn't it a fine thing to be alive and young and free, and wasn't it a miracle to be able to lie abed just thinking of the past and dreaming of the future with no one and nothing to nag you on to your feet? It was the life of Reilly she was leading, she was her own boss at last, afraid of neither dog, hog nor devil, beholden to no man. . . . But ohhh! Blast that Lucius Talent for a cruel raspy louty scheming tyrant! Her heart began to flap like a caught bird, and to comfort the poor thing she alternated the count of her blessings with his defections.

Didn't she have a thousand dollars of her very own? And the tricks he had taught her, weren't they hers to keep and to use like the lamp of Aladdin whenever she needed a thing at all? And wasn't the world as wide as the sky and wasn't the future an apple tree and she sitting under it with skirts spread to catch the ripe fallings? Yucatan! Jamaica! Nicar-

agua! Honduras! Cuba! Costa Rica! Panama! Each name was a chime to beguile the heart, each place a star to be wished on . . . but ohhh! The devil go along with that Lucius Talent, him with his "don't do this" and "do do that." The way his ruffles had to be starched just so and ironed just so and the way the things in his bureau drawers had to be lined up like soldiers in a parade. Him with his thunderclap look when she did a wrong thing and the way he cut the fat off his meat and the way he chewed with his mouth closed. (Oh, why couldn't she leave off thinking of him, for didn't she know he wasn't worth spitting on?) The way he never had the grace to throw a girl a kind word, the way he'd rest himself while you fetched and carried for him like a blackamoor dwarf. The way he took glory to himself, stuffing his pride like a Christmas goose till he thought he was a king or something and all he had to do was say "pretty please" and you'd turn your life's savings to him. "Men!" she snorted aloud. They were all alike. Tie yourself to one for love or money and he'd twist the tie into a noose around your neck every time, she told herself, unconsciously borrowing Aunt Kate's sentiments and, in fact, her very words.

And while she threw Lucius away like a pinching shoe and swore never to fall into the trap of the male again, she arched her back and ran her hands over her hard little breasts, and thought of the fellow who would steal her heart at last. Tall as a tree, with hard-muscled breadth—why, his vest would make a coat for that runty Lucius! His hair would be black as the wing of a crow—wasn't she sick to death of the sight of those silly blond ringlets? She thought of that night on the deck when Lucius grabbed her to him and a shudder went through her again as she remembered his fierceness. Lucius built a fire you had to stand back from, it chilled as it burned. But her black-haired boyo, ah, he'd build a cosy fire you could draw up to. His arms would go around her like a cave, and there they'd be, just the two of them, locked together against the world, kissing and sighing and tasting of each other's skins.

Lying on her bed of sunset gold with the good thrumming

through her loins, she thought of the Goliath who had stirred the hearts of men and women alike when he'd lifted the press that four blacks couldn't budge. There was a man! And a gentleman too—for hadn't he worn a top hat and frock coat before he peeled down? Jim Rideout. Jim Rideout, she whispered, and the memory of his name and his face and his figure brought to mind of the Widow Cassily's songs. The words came to her now, for she had listened long and well at the wall, not always taking their meaning but loving the ache they put in her breast.

*"Dark, dark was his hair as the plume of the raven,
Bright, bright was his glance as the sunbeam above,
His soul owned no thought that was selfish or craven,
His fond heart beat true to his land and his love."*

*Though lovers in plenty my favour are wooing,
With riches and rank and the land's rarest store,
I'm blind to their fond looks and deaf to their suing,
My blackbird I see and I hear evermore."*

She had a moment's misgiving—was she dear enough, pretty enough to win herself the Blackbird? She bounded up and looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyes looked back at her, a clear bright green, and her skin glowed with tearshine. She smiled at herself, and the returning smile made hard little pink-gold apples of her cheeks and put a knob on her firm little bracket chin. Arrah, she was pretty whether that priss-mouthed Lucius would admit it or not! Furthermore, she was not the kind of woman who, after she'd cried, looked as if she'd run into a hive of bees. And now, no more shedding down of tears to her toes. She needed Lucius like a hole in her shoe and she'd show him as much. She'd start that very night by dining in the main saloon, thus avoiding him and his holiness the captain as well. It was playmates she wanted, not fathers!

She chose to wear the red bombazine because it had the lowest neck of all her gowns and only the mere puff of a sleeve,

and because Velvet-Ass Tessie had once told her that the thing all men had in common was a weakness for red. She eschewed the rice powder as Lucius had advised, but she tore a bit of the red paper that lined the trunk and rubbed it across her wetted lips. She brushed her hair till it sprang alive and burnished from the silver brush Lucius had given her. She decided it had grown long enough to part in the middle, and with soaped palms she smoothed the black waves to sleekness below her temples, coaxed the ends into corkscrews, and crowned herself with a wreath of red and purple roses. Then she doused liberally with the cologne Lucius had given her, buffed her nails with a piece of chamois.

Surveying the results of her toilette, she realized that the uppity mess in the mirror had little resemblance to the raggedy Maggie of Cow Bay. "I'm growing up!" she thought. "I'm learning to beautify myself like a proper woman!" And she stifled the regret that Lucius was not standing beside her now to see how quickly she was aging. The napkins she'd been using to stuff her bodice were none too clean, but she'd give them one more do. It wasn't as if they showed. She made a mental note, however, to swipe a fresh pair from the dinner table.

Satisfied though she was with her appearance, she was not prepared for the rush the men made for her as she entered the main saloon. They bunched around her; Duke, the banjoist, foremost with a grin on his lean hawk face, and loops and loops of gold chain on his red-shirted chest.

"Lookie here, Miss Belle," he said, flipping the gold chain.

Belle's heart sank. So Lucius had gone and bet after all. "Are my eyes deceiving, or do I see you hung with Mr. Talent's own links?"

"The same, ma'am." Duke winked at the others. "Bet me I couldn't sink a passing shark with one charge. Shucks, I can shoot a possum up a gum tree. I hit that dorsal fin—bam!—and down he went. Left a trail of blood that brought a school of his pals. We had target practice for a while hour after."

"He'll be losing his buttons next. But it's nothing to me, I'm

sure." She tucked her arm in Duke's. "Isn't it a grand thing to be so sharp with a gun!"

The men laughed. They said lose your gold, lose your gal. They shook their fingers in each other's faces and swore they'd not be parted from their fortunes by any merry little Magdalenes, no sir, not them!

Belle, in a burst of gaiety, parried every jape. She laughed at their coarse jokes, took spiteful pleasure in imitating their uncouth table manners. Because it was Christmas Eve, hock was served that night with the dinner, and Belle not only drank hers but sipped freely from the glasses about her. Beyond a swig of rum cadged at Murphy's against the cold, she'd never drunk alcoholic beverages, not even the ship's luncheon ale. But tonight the devil vied with the rest for her favour. With Lucius out of the way, each man felt himself a likely successor, and they grew boisterous in their bids for her notice. They balanced plates on their elbows, spun coins, rang the rims of their wine glasses, slapped the backs of those with full mouths so that food spewed across the table.

Belle passed from the gay stage of inebriation to the mawkish and, finally, to the lonely and sad. These men pleased her only in the aggregate. They were amusing for the reflection of herself that she saw in their eyes, for the wildness that she could inject into their behaviour. Judged singly, one's beard was too nesty, one had a haired wart on his cheek, one was a rib-jabber, one smelled of tobacco, one had bad teeth, one the red-ridged neck of the farmer, one gargled when he spoke. The truth was, she decided, not one among them could hold a candle to Lucius, and not all of them put together could fill the room when he wasn't in it. Once she permitted Lucius to trespass her thinking, she began to yearn for his presence. Even quarrelling with him was better than joshing with the suckers. As for the Blackbird—he was a story and a dream entirely. Lucius was real, and wasn't it his very faults that made him so? A girl could turn sick from nothing but honeypot kisses and honey-tongued talk.

She looked across the table at the chain around Duke's neck and she felt suddenly nauseated, aware for the first time since the storm of the motion of the ship. How high and mighty she'd treated his pleas! It would have served her right if he'd clouted her one. Who was she to set herself up as the boss of his money? No nian would be a boss. Look how Uncle Paddy despised Aunt Kate for the way she nagged and penny-pinched and hid his bottle from him.

"You ain't hardly eating more than a jaybird, Miss Belle," Jeb Jarvis remarked. "You feeling poorly?"

Belle gave him a cold cat look. Jeb was not one of her favourites. He was tall but stoop-shouldered, his hair and lashes the colour of pursnip, and no chin at all. She did not deign to reply.

"Belle likes the vittles at the captain's table better."

"Can't tell. Might be the ruffles on Mr. Talent's shirt kept up her appetite."

All of them so smug about the quarrel, she thought angrily, but then her anger turned on herself. Had she thought to keep it secret by bawling a hornful of curses down the deck? Oh, Lucius was right. She'd never make a silk purse. Pig's ear, born one, die the same. The ladies men cherished, she could see them clear—silky doves, fragile creatures, meek and soft-spoken. While she, storm-ball of fire, with her savage temper, her stubborn streak—the truth was, she was fit for none but such oafs as surrounded her. She sat silent, hostile, an alley cat supping with a pack of hounds.

"What's the matter, Belle, got a bone in your throat? 'Taint your style to be so quiet."

"Bad day for the Irish—"

"What's Talent got that we ain't got, Belle?"

At the meal's end, she made for the door, but the men hemmed her in, demanded a game of faro. Seeming to jostle her accidentally, they rubbed up against her, dropped paws on her bare shoulders that slid to her breasts as she tried to duck away.

"I'll not stoop to gambling on a holy night," Belle told them.

"Well said, Belle," applauded Tom Goodberry, a missionary. "The morale of the ship would be vastly improved by a respite from gambling and cursing and fighting."

"Goodberry's right—no faro tonight," someone yelled.

"All right, then, a dance!" Duke countered. "Nothing in the good book to say folks can't be merry on Christmas Eve, is there?"

Duke took up his banjo, began to twang out a square-dance tune.

"Choose your partners!"

Two or three harmonicas joined in the music making.

"C'mon, Belle, let's show 'em how!"

Jeb Jarvis grappled her to him, began to whirl her around.

Some fellow began clapping his ham-sized hands, calling, "Hands across, Alman right, shake your boots, dance all night!" Several of the men seized partners among themselves, danced around together, shivering the timbers with their stomping. "Back again, to and fro, both hands round and away you go!"

Jeb's boots ground Belle's toes. Her throat was painfully dry, her head throbbing. "I—I'm not in good fettle, Jeb," she faltered. "My head aches something fierce. If you'll have the goodness to leave me go, I'm off to bed."

Jeb halted at once. He was a decent simple country lad who had been taught to respect the weakness of the second sex. "Sure enough? I'm right sorry. I thought you weren't feeling any too perky. I'll see you home."

The night was black to their lamp-struck eyes. Gradually the deck emerged, and the ghostly rails, the bulkheads, and stanchions soft in the moonlight. The music trailed after them, fined by the rush of the sea. Belle made no attempt at conversation, and, parted from the pack, Jeb was bashfully silent.

At her door he said, "Hope you're feeling better by morning, Miss Belle."

"Thank you kindly. Good night, Jeb."

Their heads turned to the sound of footsteps.

She caught sight of the white shirt frill, and she threw her-

self against Jeb's length, stood tiptoe to put her arms around his neck, pulled his face down to hers. Her kiss landed a little off centre, but it made a juicy smack.

Lucius Talent marched by, his head averted.

"I had a grand time, dear boy, a grrrand time! Save a place for me beside you in the morn——" her voice trailed off as Lucius disappeared up the companionway.

Jeb was staring down at her, his palms turned out at his sides like emptied pockets. She giggled. "Run along, Cuckoo," she trilled, and she closed the door in his face.

But Jeb was good-natured about it the next morning. "I saved a place for you like you said, Miss Belle," he grinned, patting the chair beside him. "I reckon it's better to get kissed for a no-good reason than get no kiss at all. By the way, your gentleman friend got trimmed at a game of dice last night. Lost his pair of gold bracelets to Will Backus here."

"Did he?" Belle shrugged. If Lucius didn't give a fig where she put her kisses, let him lose his shirt as well.

"How come you're not wearing them, Will?" Jeb persisted. "They'd look right nice on them dirty cuffs; dress them up."

"You ought to turn around and go home now, Will," Goodberry said. "That's more gold than you'll pick up on the rest of your travels."

"Sure hope you're mistaken. I'm fixing to carry home a wagon-load of nuggets."

"And then what? What will you do with all that money?"

It was a favourite question, and each man was in love with his answer.

"Buy me some ground for cotton and some for tobacco and a whole slew of field hands to plant them, and just sit on my veranda and listen at it grow."

"On your what?"

They guffawed, side-glancing at Belle.

She took off her bonnet, hung it on the knob of her chair. "It's a pity Mr. Talent has to go and lose his jewellery. Still a body ought to know when to leave off."

"Like you, eh, Belle?" one of the men called out. "You knew when to quit, didn't you? What I want to know is how much of our money you walking off with?"

"Hear, hear!"

"C'mon, Belle, tell us, how much did you win?"

The query gained momentum around the table, and Belle's breath quickened.

"How much, Belle? How much?"

She stood up. They'll think you're a cunning little rascal, he'd said. And now where was he, that Prince of Daredevils, now, when the suckers were ganging up on her? Her eyes flashed. "How much, is it? Well, it's more than you could blow off the palm of your hand, and it's not enough to buy a fine soft morning like this. Now, who's for taking a turn with me around the deck?" She snatched up her bonnet and flounced out, rolling her hips till her taffeta skirts sounded like a storm brewing.

The decoy was successful. The men trooped out after her into the sunshine, fell into step behind her, a rowdy garrison of red-shirted, blue-jeaned, black-booted fresh-air fiends, singing to make a pace. Recruits fell in readily from the rails—anything to relieve the tedium of their waterbound existence! "For we are jolly good fellows, oh, we are jolly good fellows!"

Belle commandeered a dishpan from the galley and banged on it with a wooden ladle to keep the singing loud and spruce.

"Oh, Susannah, oh don't you cry for me," they sang, and "Hail, hail, the gang's all here" and "Ole Zip Coon." The sailors appeared grinning in doorways and above the hatches, and Captain Hartstein came out of the wheelhouse to watch his passengers go berserk. But the horseplay did not draw Lucius Talent from his morning's rest.

Winded, Belle dropped down on one of the hatches. Jeb and several others seated themselves around her. The rest of the men splintered off into groups, some to the rails to bet on the landfall or to spin the endless yarns of gold, some to resume their game of shooting at a bottle hung from a spar, some to

the Christmas prayer service that Goodberry was holding in the saloon.

Those who had elected to sit with Belle began to ask questions of her. They asked because they would rather listen to her than to each other, because it gave them a reason to keep their eyes on her. How did it happen, they wanted to know, fingering the nosegays that caught up her skirt, that a pretty young girl stowed away on a ship in the middle of the night? What were her folks like, and wouldn't they have the whole United States Navy out looking for her? What did she plan to do when she got to San Francisco?

Belle grew restive under their prodding. (What were her folks like? Holy Mary!) She jumped up, went to the rail, stared at the shimmering sea. The water was bright and cruel, myriads of little knives, pricking the eyeballs. Melancholy engulfed her. Paul Prys, the lot of them. They'd never dared to badger her when Lucius was at her side.

The ship's gong tolled. At the eighth and last bell, she swung away resolutely from the rail. She had promised Lucius to soap and salve her hands before each meal and at bedtime. "It is on the sensitivity and therefore the smoothness of your fingertips that our livelihood depends," he had cautioned her, "if not our very lives." In her early enthusiasm she had even agreed to sponge-bathe her whole body daily because Lucius insisted that a woman had to be sweet-smelling in order to fascinate men (and every man, whether she liked him or not, was a potential customer). As for smelling sweet, she had found it quicker and easier to squirt herself with the cologne. To smell of carnations was certainly more fascinating than soap. But she had been faithful about the care of her hands. Gone were the rims of black, the hangnails, the rough tips. Her nails were filed to perfect ovals, each edged delicately in white, thanks to the little sponge stone that bled milk when wetted. The salve had given her skin a satiny finish, and the idleness of her life aboard ship had kept her hands free from blemish. She held them out in front of her, eyeing them pridefully as she looked

near Lucius' closed door. She could hear the slurp of water in his bowl. At his toilette, as he probably had been for the last hour, the picky way he did each thing and the many things he did. No! She would not knock on his door. She would not stand there, a mouldy sack, asking him politely, as if he'd never called her guttersnipe and pig's ear; did he have some more of that hand salve—she was that sorry to be bothering him but she'd just used the last and since he'd made her swear never to miss a time—no! blast his eyes, she'd choke first!

She walked on to her stateroom, opened the door, drew back with a little cry.

Will Backus was tipped back on the stool against her wash basin, spinning the two gold bracelets around the blade of his bowie knife. In the instant of her entrance, he jumped behind her, backed against the closed door, set the bracelets to hoop-dancing again. "Howdy, sugar."

Belle had scarcely noticed Will Backus before; he had always been just one of the southern horde, but she took his measure carefully now—the long angular frame, the comically large ears that stuck out of the bearded face, the chin and nose bent to each other till you could crack a nut between them. The little black-hooded eyes blinked frequently, reminding her of Moses the Crow. He'd be a mean man to get around once he'd screwed up his courage to do a thing—and judging by the whisky he was breathing out, he'd screwed it up all right. But his blinking gave him away. He was nervous and he was stupid, and Uncle Paddy had been neither with more meat on him to fight. Well, she'd put this bird-eyed gangleshanks to her own use, him and his bracelets. She'd come to Lucius with gold in each hand.

"Don't try to sweet me, Mr. Backus! You've no business in my private cabin, and I've a good mind to turn you over to the captain. State your business, sir!"

He chuckled. He shot the bracelets. They sailed through the air on to her bed. "How'd you like to have them bracelets for your pretty loving arms?"

"Show me the girl that wouldn't. But——"

"Reckon if you had them bracelets you'd keep them, or turn them back to your gambling friend?"

"Now why would I do a thing like that?"

"No fun sparking a girl that's going to close her eyes and pretend like you're somebody else."

"Sparking, eh? Well, let me tell you, my boy, there'll be none of that. But I'd be glad to *buy* the bracelets. I'm not a poor girl, you know." She buffed her nails on her berth, tilted her head away from their sparkle—a gesture she'd picked up from Lucius. "What's your price?"

The man's bravado dissolved at her composure. He broke toward her, grasped her to him. "Oh, God, I'm crazy for you, Belle," he croaked. "You got us all riled up. That's all we do down in the hold—just talk about you and think and dream about you. I tell you I can't stand it——"

She braced herself against his arms. Her stomach went queasy from the smell of his breath, but she forced a lilt. "Foolish laddie, first scaring and then squeezing me half to death? Think of your poor dear mother before you act the brute to a helpless girl alone. Now out with it—what'll you take for the bracelets?"

He blinked twice. His tongue darted to the side of his mouth, made a quick round of his lips. "A hug and a kiss," he whispered, "from the purtiest little chickapee this side o' paradise!"

"One hug and one kiss only?"

With a groan, his arms tightened around her waist. She suffered his moist soft sour mouth to worm its way into hers. She let his hands run up and down her back and settle like squashed tomatoes on the skin above her shoulder blades. Then she pulled back. "That's it, Will Backus, let go now; you promised," and when his hold tightened, "Lay off me, you lout!"

But the man's eyes were glazed, his body tight against her as a coiled spring. His elbows dug into her sides as his hands ripped the back of her bodice in two. The bodice gave way and in the instant that he stood stunned by the burst of white

flapping wings, she broke from his grasp, ran to the door. Naked to the waist, she leaned out, bellowed down the corridor, "Ringadora! Ringadorra-a-a-a!"

Will Backus jerked her back into the room, pulled her roughly to him, but her cocked ears caught the padding footsteps and she spat through her teeth into his face.

The door swung open. Lucius, clad in trousers and slippers, one side of his face white with lather, held the tangled pair motionless at the point of his pistol.

"I ought to shoot you down like a dog, Will Backus, but I don't like the sight of blood. Now, get down on your hands and knees. Quick!"

The man went down as if every bone in his body were broken.

"Now, crawl out of here like the hound you are and crawl fast if you don't want your tail shot off."

Backus scuttled out on all fours. Lucius slammed the door, turned back to Belle who was clutching the towel rack, livid, half fainting now that the danger was past. He studied her with pleased surprise. His glance ultimately took in the napkins on the floor, and he smiled. He set his gun on the bureau, picked up the napkins and wiped his lathered face with them. Then he tossed them aside. "I hadn't realized that the bud might be as enchanting as the flower. Come here."

She leaped to him, threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Lucius, Lucius, whatever would I do without you? I was just coming to say the money's yours for the taking. Cross my heart and hope to die if I wasn't. Darling love, we'll go to the captain this very minute!"

He lifted her chin, smiled into her brimming eyes.

"Bother the captain," he whispered against her lips.

His mouth was sweet as August fruit. Sweeter. She clung to him, moaning softly at the wonder of his flesh against hers, trying to remember that she had once been afraid.

After a moment or two, he lifted her up out of her skirt as easily as he'd pluck the blossom from a plant, and he carried her to the bed.

CHAPTER VII

“**L**AND HO!”

The call burst from the wheelhouse early the next morning, the eighth day out of New Orleans. It ran through the ship quick as pain down a nerve. The men came running, bootless, half dressed. Within minutes, all hands were on deck, squawking like gulls in full cry. As if scattered by the sound, a heavy rain cloud lifted and through the haze of hidden sun emerged the headland of Porto Bello-- a jagged promontory of rock banded at the base with brilliant green vegetation, flounced by white breakers. Behind the headland rose the Andes of Darién, turbaned in a smoke of rain.

The *Falcon* sailed on, west along the coastal hills, to the land-locked harbour of Chagres. The western side of the Chagres River was flat and marshy; the eastern side, high steep cliff runnelled with vines and bushes. Atop the cliff, the once impregnable Spanish castle, San Lorenzo, snoozed in the peace of old age. Three goats cropped the green-tufted battlements. A naked brown child astride one of the cannon scrambled down at the sight of the ship, and disappeared.

Because of the dangerous reefs that deckled the harbour and also because of the sand bar across the river mouth, the *Falcon* was obliged to anchor a mile and a half out. Of the native village at the base of the cliffs some miles south of the fortress, they could see the tops of thatched huts among tall coconut palms. All eyes roamed the shore, the purposes of the journey forgotten in the simple thrill of sighting a new and beautiful land.

Belle squeezed Lucius' arm. "Can you believe it—we're here! Just hark to the mewling of the gulls! My, it's a peaceful-looking paradise."

"Wasn't always so peaceful," Lucius said. "Couple of centuries ago that old castle was the strongest bastion of the Spanish Main."

"Was it now?" she said, looking up at him worshipfully. The memory of his love-making lay like a secret behind her eyes. She saw again the white withy frame, the purely marvelous economy of his flesh and bones. It was as if he had kept only what was necessary, preferring wiry tendons to bulges of muscle as part of his determination to travel light. And to her who had not before seen a man uncovered, it seemed a further mark of his ingenuity that his manhood could pack small into tight-fitting trousers. He was altogether remarkable, she thought as she looked up at him in the sun, and the butter-gold hair was the crown that proved the Lord had set him higher than his drab and motley brothers. "And tell us, what happened to crumble it?"

The men listened as Lucius told of the bloody exploits of Oxenham, Mansveldt, Henry Morgan. He told of how Morgan had sacked Old Panama, torturing and killing the dons, setting fire to their homes, robbing the churches, dragging Castilian ladies out of the nunneries to be ravished by his blood-crazed men.

"Oh, they were heartless villains, those buccaneers. L'Ollonais once beheaded seventy Spaniards with his own sword and sent the heads in a canoe to the Governor of Nombre de Dios. Women he tortured and raped and then butchered. History has it he slit a señorita right down the middle with his cutlass, tore out her still warm heart and ate it, washing it down with a cup of her blood."

"Hist!" Belle gasped, shivering with delight at the memory of his gentle mastery, he who knew so much of the cruelty of men.

By noon the last link of the anchor chain clanked on the

windlass. The deck looked like an arsenal. The Argonauts had spent the morning overhauling their revolvers, charging their barrels, honing their bowie knives on their boots. Each man had a different mode of keeping his gold—when and if he found it. One told of the false bottom to his trunk, one showed a strongbox with a secret lock, one had fashioned a many-pocketed leather belt. One sat on his suitcase putting the last stitches in a buckskin bag—the fifteenth one he had made, and each of twenty pounds' capacity. The talk was of retorts and crucibles and tests, of precautions against jungle fever while crossing the isthmus, of their chances for accommodation on the *Falcon's* sister ship, the *California*, which had left New York two months before and should have made it around the Horn to Panama by this time. And, honing their voices as sharp as their blades, was the determination of each man to be first off the ship.

The first contingent to Panama numbered about half the *Falcon's* company—all that the available banana boats, or bungos, could accommodate. More bungos would be drifting in mañana, the villagers signified, but the Argonauts, brandishing greenbacks and pistols and knives, preferred overcrowding in the guayacan canoes to chafing in the primitive settlement. Some intrepid diehards set out by shank's mare along the left bank trail. They could not believe that the forty crow-flight miles to Panama were as difficult as the natives claimed, and few of them lived to admit their mistake.

Of the stranded, some set up pup tents under the palms, as far from the heaps of offal and stagnant mudholes of the village as safety from jungle fauna permitted. The rest, including Belle and Lucius, resigned themselves to the stench and the hospitality of the natives.

Lucius chose his hostess with reasoning care, as was his wont, leaving as little as possible to chance and then trusting the little. The woman he singled out was enormously fat. She wore a Panama hat, a dingy calico covering, and a baby slung

like a carbine across her upper torso. She puffed, gazing serenely at the strangers, on a large black cigar.

"By her size you know she takes pleasure in her cooking and by her hat you know she is rich. We shall dine well, you'll see," he told Belle.

He strolled over to the fat woman, took off his hat, and bowed low. He made some elementary gestures that involved his mouth and stomach. He went into further detail by pointing to Belle and hefting his wallet.

The woman smiled. Her face was moulded on strong primitive lines and her Mongoloid brown eyes were at once shy and womanly wise. She put out a dimpled hand to touch a gold ringlet on Lucius' bared head.

"Cabeza del oro," she said, and then she called something to the natives who sat about in the dirt, holding their big toes. In a matter of moments whole families gathered around Lucius, jabbering and grinning.

"What's that they're saying, Goodberry?" Lucius asked the missionary over his shoulder.

"They like your hair," Goodberry said dryly. "Gold is very popular this year."

Lucius did not hesitate. He took the little nail scissors from his breast pocket, snipped a lock (well toward the back, Belle couldn't help noticing), and presented it with another deep bow to the fat woman.

"Más, más!" the others cried, holding out their hands.

Lucius smiled but shook his head. The fat woman beamed and beckoned Lucius and Belle to follow her.

While their shipmates dined on pork fat and biscuits and drank water from coconut shells, "the Golden One" and his girl partook of the sumptuous buffet which Maria of the Panama hat spread for them on the top of the hencoop: roasted fowl, baked plantains, rice boiled in coconut milk, large, hard-boiled eggs with orange yolks, sweetened coffee, and a variety of fresh fruits—*sapota*, persimmon, figs, and oranges. The two of them gorged shamelessly before an intent

audience of children and dogs, and that night they slept in Maria's bohío—Belle in the straw loft under the sun-baked roof, and Lucius below in the only hammock with Maria waving a palm leaf across him through the night.

It was not for nothing that Chagres was known as the unhealthiest spot in Christendom or that the Argonauts to come would find in their life insurance policies clauses which specified that a night spent in Chagres constituted a forfeiture. The heat and humidity were so intense that the unacclimatised Americans felt the threat of suffocation with every breath they drew. The sun had a fiery blinding quality that took the colour out of all things except the brilliant green vegetation that skirted the cliffs and the encroaching jungle. To walk uncovered in its glare produced severe headache and skin burn. Off and on during the day would come the gusty showers during which they huddled in the foul huts or cowered against tree trunks or under the India-rubber ponchos that some of them had wisely included in their equipment. Nevertheless, rain or shine, they remained soaked to their bug-bitten skins.

Several of the white men soon contracted the dreaded jungle fever. They lay shivering in their blankets, their faces flushed, their eyes suffused. "Waaer! Waaer!" they moaned over and over, no longer able to enunciate through their engorged lips. Fortunately there was no dearth of water, for the Rio Chagres, which originated in the clean fastness of the Cordillera, ran swiftly, sped by the rains, through dolomite cliffs, through primeval forest and across broad savannas, remaining fresh until it petered out in the natural sand bar that held back the sea.

The sick men were attended by fearful companions who were convinced that the fever was contagious. The natives brought potions brewed of wasps and lizard legs to ease the stricken men but only the desperate had the fortitude to swallow the slimy stuff. Several of the well men were dosing themselves with quinine and claret, but these complained so bitterly

of ear-buzzing and head-throbbing that Belle and Lucius were not tempted to avail themselves of the precaution.

Lucius, listless and cross as a snapping turtle, spent the time of waiting in his hammock, served by his faithful behemoth. The ooze of perspiration that constantly renewed itself on his body was both a physical torture and an affront to his fastidious nature. At his direction, the hammock had been hung cater-cornered between door and window so that the least breeze could find him. He lay with his eyes closed, dozing or self-tranced, his curls plastered darkly to his brow, his shirt opened to the waist. Now and then he lifted a limp hand in signal, and if Maria were busy with her cooking, she would send one of the children to fan him or bring him his pipe. He rose only to eat, to relieve himself, and to change his linen.

Curiously enough, Belle, who had had no defences against the roll of the sea, stood the tropical climate very well. The old rookery of the Five Points in which she had been reared had been built on an imperfectly drained swamp, and she had evidently acquired some immunity to the miasmal poisons that rose from marshland. Furthermore, as a child of the slums, she was stoical about bodily discomforts. Excessive heat, stench, filth, bugs, and crowded quarters were old enemies which she battled absent-mindedly with little or no loss of energy. And because she kept busy, she was not galled by the idleness and anxiety which further vitiated the dispositions of her ship-mates. She did what she could to relieve the sick men. (Will Backus was one of them and the misery in his eyes whenever she attended him was pitiful to see.) She helped Maria with the smallest children, exchanged language lessons with the older ones, soaped and pounded Lucius' laundry at the river bank with the native women, and went bathing with them in the river. They found her vastly amusing—that she chose to dress like an *hombrecito*, a little man; that she wore clothes into the water (her shift); that she spoke the words of their language with such babyish imperfection. Belle did not mind their fingering of her clothes, their ogling, their hoots of

derision. Compared to the wary-eyed bleak-natured Negroes she'd lived among in the Five Points, these darkies were, as she tried to tell Lucius, just merry children.

One morning Belle decided to indulge her desire to bathe in the nude as the native women did. She borrowed a cake of perfumed soap from Lucius' toilette kit, and went off by herself before breakfast, following the path along the left bank. Less than half a mile from the village she found a spot that afforded complete privacy: a half-moon gouge in the bank, breasted by an ancient, oddly formed sycamore which stretched two long arms over the water, each kimono-sleeved with bejuco vines. Butterflies of electric blue, of bronze-spotted yellow, of pink with black-laced designs, blew about like blossoms in a wind. Birds chattered and sang among themselves like market women.

Belle began to sing too. She sang of cockles and mussels alive, alive-oh! and she dropped her clothes on a gnarled tree root and walked the springy carpet of leaves to the shore. She looked about carefully for crocodiles, but there was nothing inimical in nature this morning, only a Sunday-best display. Once in the cool water, she thrashed about joyously, now on her stomach, now on her back. Finally she found the courage to duck her head, and then she worked up a lather of soap thick as a hat.

"Buenos días, señorita."

The greeting was clear and serene as a birdcall, and the voice was male.

Belle's head jerked about. The vine which had hid her from view of the townspeople had also hid from her view a home-ward-bound bongo. The smiling young boatman was so close she could see the mauve crinkling about his nipples. She screamed.

Without stopping to douse her head, she hopped wide-legged through the water to shore, blushing as she ran. As she bent to pick up her shirt, she screamed again. Hanging motionless and upside down from a branch of the sycamore was a creature

that defied sight and reason. Grey-haired, blunt-nosed, with neither ears nor tail, its open eyes regarded her from under a scummy fringe of bangs. The animal looked so much a part of the tree that she realized it had probably been there when she came and she began to tremble. She heard the splashing of water and she wheeled to see the boatman clambering ashore. She pointed, screaming and screaming, to the sloth.

He waved his hand. "De nada," he said, half laughing, and then suddenly serious, he sprang forward, grabbing her forearm, whirled her behind him so forcefully that she fell to the ground. She started to rise, stared, froze. Coming up out of her slipper, arched like a disapproving dowager, was a small green snake. She saw the two prongs of red tongue wave in the air.

The boy pulled a machete from his breechclout and his arm described a swift arc, severing the head. Belle watched him hack away at the coils, watched half a dozen bits of snake wriggle harmlessly on the ground.

"El serpiente," the boy said, wiping his knife and slipping it back into his waist. "Muy malo."

He put out a hand to Belle and she let him pull her up. Her legs felt like paper bags and she swayed dizzily, clinging to his arms for support. She hung thus for a moment, gulping down the nausea of fear and revulsion that women since Eve have felt at the sight of a snake. When she opened her eyes, she saw the boy's glance travel her white-skinned form. She pushed him from her, trying to cover her parts with her arms and at the same time pointing to her clothes which she dared not fetch herself because of the still hanging sloth.

The boy understood. He brought them to her, but Belle was too humiliated by her nakedness for civility. She grabbed her things. "Now get away from me, you bug-eyed heathen! Get along with you, get!"

The boy hung his head and started for the water. Impulsively she ran after him. "Hey, wait!" He turned around. Holding her clothes against herself, she pleaded, "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I was just scared out of my wits!"

He was only a lad, she could see that now. His slight, olive-skinned body was still hairless, and his face had not yet hardened into manhood. His eyes were large, the colour of plums, and they held the look of a pet animal who has been kicked.

She put out a hand to him. "Gracias. Muchas gracias."

He broke into a slow, sweet smile, holding her hand to his chest. "Amigo-mía."

"Si. Amigo," she said, nodding vigorously. She withdrew her hand, pointed to herself. "Me—Belle."

"Belle," he repeated gravely. "Soy Manuel Joselito Arrieta de Bega. A los pies de usía, su humilde servidor."

"Manuel, is it? Well, lad, it's lucky you happened along, for I'd have died of the fright if not of the snake bite."

"Hasta luego, Señorita Belle."

The boy bowed and turned and waded into the river, overtaking with swift strokes the down-drifting bungo.

Belle rinsed her stiffened hair and put her clothes on quickly, anxious, even though Manuel had not considered him a menace, to get away from the beast that hung upside down within plain view. Once on the path, she walked slowly, savouring the near-miss of danger, and the romance of being rescued. Suddenly a thought struck her. Manuel was a boatman! He had an empty bungo! She broke into a run.

She was panting, wringing wet, when she reached the village. Manuel was beaching his canoe while a knot of Americans stood about him, shouting and waving money. She forced her way through the crowd, separating her erstwhile shipmates with flying fists, and threw herself upon Manuel. "Manuel mi amigo, vamoose Panama—your bungo—por favor?"

The young mestizo looked down at the white girl. He had held her hand to his heart and he had seen the sea in her eyes and they had spoken each other's given names. The men who stood about flourishing dollar bills had no chance.

"Con mucho gusto, Señorita Belle. Vamonos Panama. Mañana."

Lucius suddenly materialized beside them. He had lain inert

as a sun-struck lizard for two days, but his timing was infallible as always. "Vamos instante," he told the boy. "Vamos Panama hoy. Para usted, mucho dinero."

Manuel looked doubtfully at Belle.

Belle pointed to Lucius and then to herself. "Mi hombre."

"Si," Manuel agreed then. "Un momentito." A little moment. Time perhaps to greet his family, to breakfast, to take on supplies and an assistant for the upstream trip.

"Manuel, you're a life-saver twice over," Belle said fervently, and she blew him a kiss. To Lucius she added, "It's a bit smaller than the other boats but it looks trim. And the roof is freshly thatched."

"We're in no position to quibble. I don't know what you did to deserve him, little one, but you did it in the nick of time. Look yonder."

Belle followed his glance to the bay. Another paddlewheel was anchored near the *Falcon*.

"The *Isthmus*!"

She thought of the tall dark giant whom the ship housed and who soon would be standing on the same spot of land where she stood now. She remembered her dream of being a fine lady in a new country wed to a strapping young man—the Blackbird himself. And then under her squinting lids, her eyes slid to Lucius, and she thought of the day, the blissful day, when he'd taught her the ways of love, and with a little sigh, she threw the Blackbird back into the sea.

CHAPTER VIII

BELLE AND LUCIUS and the Reverend Goodberry, whom they had picked from the clamouring multitude to share their diminutive bungo because of his facility with the language, sat on their luggage hour after hour while Manuel concluded his "little moment." They pored over Goodberry's map, estimating that the bungo trip to Cruces would take at least three days against the swift current. At Cruces, where the river turned east and north, they would proceed by pack mule down the old King's highway, the Camino del Oro, to Panama.

At last Manuel strolled up, arm in arm with a burly black who was introduced to them as Pedro, the second boatman. The two natives set about loading equipment and belongings under the thwarts.

They were about to embark when they saw Maria, ponderous as a broad-beamed ship, coming down the path. She was followed by a single file of children bearing baskets on their heads. Food for the journey, Maria told them, and she stood by with an air of dignified bereavement while the boatmen stowed the baskets. The missionary stepped into the bungo, seated himself under the palm canopy.

"Adiós, Maria," Belle called. "Adiós, niños." She took a seat opposite the missionary.

Maria looked at Lucius with soft eyes. "Que le vaya bien."

Lucius held his hat over his heart. "Gracias, Maria," he said solemnly. "You will forgive me, I hope, for not accepting the favour you wished to confer upon me last night. Even if I were not already somewhat involved with this skinny little shamrock,

I assure you I could not have been tempted. The heat, you know. And the accommodations—a hammock could be disastrous in your present shape. But the provisions left little to be desired. We are in your debt, Señora. For the rest, may I wish you a speedy return of your husband. I think he has carried his last load of bananas for some time, but the boat business will be better than ever. You will be rich. I wish you well." He bowed deeply. "Hasta la vista."

Maria's eyes filled at what, judging by the length and tone, had evidently been a most beautiful farewell. She thanked the Golden One and voiced wishes for his safety and his health. And, perhaps in a burst of guilt, she whipped the straw hat off her head and sent it swirling into Belle's lap. Then she turned and waddled off, the children straggling in her wake.

Lucius climbed into the boat, sat down beside Belle. She tilted Maria's hat rakishly on her head, giggling softly.

"You and the fat old Maria—ah, that's rich! The things that happen in the dark of night while babes lie sleeping!"

"Fat or skinny, a woman's a woman," Lucius said, annoyed by the smugness of youth and perhaps a little ashamed of himself for having had his little joke at the good Maria's expense. "She's not the first nor I dare say the last to wish to lie with me."

Belle glanced at the missionary, lowered her voice. "If there's anything besides the sea that turns my stomach queasy, it's a man who fattens his pride with his own praise."

The missionary coughed.

Belle sniffed.

Lucius puffed at his pipe.

The paddles dipped rhythmically in the water.

The perspiration smoked off Pedro's rippling back.

Behind, in the stern, Manuel began to sing in a mournful sweet treble.

*"Ten piedad, piedad de mis penas,
En piedad, piedad de mi amor."*

"Have pity on my sufferings," Goodberry translated softly, "have pity on my love."

Upriver glided the jungle gondola, away from the filth and confusion of the village, into a world of seclusion and tainted beauty. Colour—birds, blossoms, butterflies—splashed the canyon of greenery. Green arms, green limbs, green fingers, green mouths, twisting, pushing, tangling. And everywhere the indiscriminate mingling of the quick and the dead, stench and perfume. It was too much. The eyes glazed, the senses dulled, the mind recoiled, the head drooped. . . .

On and on ran the river. The sun cracked their lips. Sudden thunderstorms drenched and chilled. They itched and they cramped and they snapped at each other over small things. The crash of a rotten tree sent them jumping like sleepers whose ears had been screamed into. The missionary, though more placid than Belle or Lucius, was maddeningly clumsy. Asked to pass the water keg, he would surely drop it on someone's foot. If he held the frying pan, the fish burned, and more than once he very nearly overturned the boat. Pedro was as stolid and silent as an animal. And Manuel, charming though he was, showed the carelessness of his youth again and again—taking unnecessary chances with the rapids so that they grounded on stumps and falling asleep during his night watches—they were saved from a prowling jaguar only because Lucius was quick on the draw.

On the third day of travel the terrain changed, and their spirits revived. The jungle gave way to broad plains, rimmed in the distance by domed mountains. The air became thinner, purer, casier to breathe. An occasional hacienda could be glimpsed beyond cultivated fields of maize and plantain. Horned bullocks and sheep grazed the stubby grass. The river, so recently panther, curled now, lithe and sleek as a kitten, lapping the pebbly shores.

By nightfall they pulled into the sizeable village of Gorgona.

They were warmly greeted by the alcalde, the mayor, who

insisted upon putting them up. His greensward, he told them, was being readied for the weekly fandango which would be particularly well attended that evening because it marked the year's end. The fandango was a communal festivity. The poorer folk celebrated on the banks of the river to the beat of keglike drums, but the aristocracy convened traditionally on his pleasance to the music of violins and guitars and flutes as well as drums. It would give him, he said, a fantastic pleasure to have the Norteamericanos grace the fiesta with their honoured presences.

The alcalde, despite his barrel shape, bowed constantly, and his fulsome compliments were peppered with apologies for the inadequacy of his home which was, nevertheless, theirs. He kissed Belle's hand and he assured the two white men that he was at their service. Servants would be sent to fetch their luggage. Candles would be dispatched at once to their chambers. The princesita would have the kindness to endure the humbleness of his daughter's room. Tía Chepita would assist the young ladies in the making of their toilette.

Belle was unfamiliar with the extravagance of Latin courtesy. She took the alcalde's lip service literally, convinced that Americans were regarded as superior beings by these back-country foreigners. With the adaptability of a born actress, she was soon behaving as though born to the purple. She permitted Tía Chepita, an ageless Indian crone with broken teeth and gnarled but deft hands, to bathe her, shampoo her hair, dress her. Tía Chepita likewise attended Lorita, the mayor's daughter. Belle thought Lorita a poor thing except for her long black hair, and her small hands and feet. She considered the Spanish girl's features too oriental, the nose too long, too curved at the tip. Lorita said she was fifteen, but her breasts were big as grapefruits and her figure had none of the angularity of the adolescent.

Lorita was openly fascinated by Belle's bouffant skirts, her frilled cambric trousers. Both she and the old servant gaped and clucked at silk so stiffly lined that it stood by itself! Hooks

and eyes were also a novelty in Gorgona, where fastenings were still limited to lacings and bows. Shyly twinkling, Lorita showed Belle an innovation of her own. She had sewn her numerous petticoats to her flounced skirt, a trick which facilitated movement and added no inches to the tiny waist. Unlike Belle's basque bodice, Lorita's off-the-shoulder blouse was loose-fitting, and it tucked inside the skirt, both garments held in place by a woven multicoloured sash.

The girls' movements cast darting shadows in the candle-lit bedroom. Through the open window came the sounds of the musicians tuning up, and the scent of jasmine. The arthritic hands of the crone on their dewy skins reminded the girls of their power, whetted their desire to use it cruelly, quickly.

Belle was wearing the red bombazine because Lucius had not seen her in it that night on the ship, and because foreigners, she felt sure, were no different from other men in their fondness for red. The black pearl looked dull against her tanned skin. She would dearly have loved a string of diamonds, even fake ones, anything to bring out the fire of her eyes, but the only jewellery she owned was a bracelet Lucius had given her. Belle consoled herself with the observation that Lorita wore no jewellery either, only an ebony cross that added nothing to her appeal, and she a mayor's daughter. Besides, Lorita had told her that the women of Gorgona would all dress alike in the embroidered white cotton blouses and skirts. Belle would be a red rose in a field of daisies. Each man would contrive to partner her, to touch her hand, to whirl her waist. Later, perhaps she would sing to them from the veranda. The moon would put a pale shine on their upturned faces, but the gold light of the many-tapered candelabra would be on hers. First she would melt their hearts with "Irish Molly O!"; then with the racy "O'Shanahan Dhu," she'd fire their blood. And, then, *then*, the wild dancing, the stolen embraces, the impassioned whispers—ah, of this night Gorgona would talk often and often till the very children playing on the floor would take up

the tale: "Mother, tell us about the night the American lady came to the fandango."

"Señorita," Lorita put a light hand on her arm. "Esta usted listo?"

Roused from her fantasy, Belle turned from the mirror. Lorita's hair was dressed with flower sprays of coral and sea shells and pearls strung on wires so that they trembled at every turn of the girl's head. Enviously, Belle touched the ornaments.

"Tembleques," Lorita said. "From Bogota." She took a pair of similar combs from the drawer and she pinned one above each of Belle's ears. The princesita, not to be outdone, rummaged through her trunk, presented Lorita with a pair of white lace mitts that had shrunk in the washing.

Arm in arm, the two girls entered the parlour where the gentlemen waited, sipping brandy. Then Lorita saw Lucius, and her arm dropped from Belle's. The friendship was over.

Belle watched Lorita grimly. The little provincial's back arched, her head tilted, a basaltic gleam lit her eyes, and Belle would not have been surprised if a forked tongue had curled from her mouth as she spoke her greetings and made a deep curtsy to the golden-haired American gentleman with the features of a saint and the smile of a sinner.

Lucius, freshly barbered, sporting a frilled shirt, a bright blue kerchief, flowered vest, black boots that shone like wet marble, and what jewellery remained to him—rings, bracelet, watch and fob—was not unprepared for female admiration. What surprised him was that Gorgona should contain in its small suburban setting a dusky little gem of such perfection. He set aside his brandy, and holding his hat under his arm, he bowed low over the girl's proffered hand, turned it palm upward before he kissed it. Over their fingertips, their eyes held.

Before Belle could come between the moonstruck pair, she felt her elbows taken charge of—one by Goodberry and one by the potbellied alcalde, propelled, despite her laggard steps and backward glances, through the arched doorway to the lawn.

"You look charming, Belle!" Goodberry assured her. "A far cry from the bungo, eh?"

"Ah, princesita," breathed the alcalde. "Que divina!"

Oh, cry off, you lummocks, Belle thought bitterly, and aloud, through stiff lips, "It's kind of you to say so."

Under the low pumpkin moon, white-garbed couples dipped and swayed to the music in a slow tango-like version of a waltz. The men wore loose white blouses fringed at the hips, and knee-length pants, alpargatas, and braided hats pinned up off the forehead with a flower. The ladies held their ornamented heads high and they fanned their flounced skirts, never taking their eyes from their partners' faces. The performance had a stylized solemnity wholly different from the slapdash jollity of American socials. When the music stopped, they broke from the discipline of the dance like children from a church service. They laughed and clapped and shouted, "Opa! Opa!"

In the break, the alcalde announced his American guests by fracturing their names. The men bowed and the ladies curtsied, after which all were drawn into the newly forming circle of couples. The orchestra struck up a lively tune for the cumbia, an old slave dance mimetic of the woman's service to her master. For this, the partners faced each other, the man taking a little backward jump-step, the woman sliding in front of him, holding a lighted candle in her hand. Thus illuminated, Belle detected some of the male interest she had anticipated, but she was too sullen with jealousy to put promise in her smile or even to move with grace. Every time she caught sight of Lucius smiling down at the petite Lorita, her knees grew weak. Her skirts were heavy and hot. The music jangled raucously in her ears, the guitar harsh, the violins whining. Holding the candle up gave her a pain in her arm.

During a shift in the partnering, she found herself opposite the traitor himself. She scowled at him. He raised his eyebrows.

"Anything wrong, Belle?"

"Eat her up with a spoon and be done with it!"

The waxed ends of Lucius' moustache twitched. "So that's

it. Your eyes are green as graveyard grass. Jealousy becomes you."

"Don't be breakin' your arse to blarney me quiet! Jealous, the man says! Me jealous of a nigger-skinned cow-eyed hayseed?"

"Watch the candle!" Lucius warned.

Too late. Two beads of hot wax fell, turned to black on the red skirt. "Look what you did! Went and ruined my best gown!"

"Never mind. You're too sunburned for red anyway. Discard it."

Before she could reply, Lucius passed to the lady on her left, and the perspiring alcalde was jack-in-the-boxing in front of her.

The cumbia ended. Belle deposited the hateful stick of bee's wax in a candelabra on the porch railing. She thought of her daydream—the way she was going to sing from that porch, lit by the candelabra—hah! She kicked hard at railing.

The guests meanwhile were calling for the tamborito. And then, incredibly, Lorita's name fell from everyone's lips. Lorita! Lorita! Her name became a chant, the people clapped to it, shook rattles to it. Lorita was forced by popular demand into the centre of the green. A violin struck up a sinuous bolero phrase, repeated it again and again, while Lorita swayed dreamily as if she were giving the fragment of tune a chance to work its spell upon her. Then the other musicians took up the phrase and the phrase widened, thickened, deepened—slowly, insidiously, irrevocably, like desire mounting. The girl writhed from the waist and her arms undulated, her feet began to glide. The spectators clicked castanets to the beat. A man broke from the circle, pirouetted and stamped around Lorita, pretending to try to catch her while she evaded his embrace. Then the man placed his hat on the girl's head and a chorus of "Opas" went up from the crowd. Another man entered the ring, executed another pantomime courtship, and the crowd cheered as his straw hat topped the first. The men partners

succeeded each other and the hats piled up on the girl's head. The tempo of the music quickened, the dancers' movements became more voluptuous, the shrillness of the "Opas" gave way to erotic hoarseness. Lorita danced on, her neck taut as a swan's to balance the tower of hats while her lower body agitated the skirt to a froth of whitecaps.

Belle stood forgotten in the sidelines. Lucius, beside her, had eyes only for Lorita's witchery. His lips parted, his shirt frill quivered, his breathing was audible. Another hat for the girl. Another roar of acclaim. This time Lucius threw his voice in with the rest. "Opa ! Opa !"

Lorita, cluding the arms of a suitor, backed close to the circle. Belle felt the wind of her whirling skirt. She grabbed the end of Lorita's sash at the moment the girl flung herself back to the centre of the greensward. Unsashed, the skirt went down like spilled cream around the girl's feet. The men gasped. The ladies screamed. Lorita's bare olive thighs stood revealed to all, salaciously topped by a pair of white flounced panties.

"Madre de Dios !" the alcalde cried out, holding his fat cheeks.

Lucius grabbed Belle's hand which still clutched the sash. "Bitchcat !" The sash fell from her hand under the bite of his grasp, and he kicked it quickly behind them.

The violinists had turned to stone, their bows arrested in mid-air. Lorita's face wore a grotesque smile. The tears rolled unchecked down her cheeks. But her feet did not cease to beat out the ghost-rhythm within the foam of petticoats, and the column of hats still crowned the erect little head. Without losing a beat, Lorita's knees bent deep, her hands recovered the skirt, brought it up around her waist. She held it to her spine with one hand, waved the other hand in the air as she rose to her full height.

The musicians woke from their trance. Lucius sprang into the ring, began to improvise dance steps with consummate dignity around the steadily weeping girl. And then carefully, oh,

so carefully, he placed his buff plug hat atop the braided panamas.

"Opa!" The cry broke, single-throated, from the guests.

The tamborito came to a crashing finish. The clapping and yelling rang in the air as if the night were a box. Belle saw that Lucius was leading Lorita in her direction. After shaming her, was he? In front of all the foreigners! She picked up her skirts and ran for the house.

Lucius caught her as she crossed the threshold. He dragged her, struggling, into the parlour, pulled her down with him on the couch, forced her across his knees, threw her skirts over her head. He meant to hurt her and he whacked at her pantaletted seat with all his might until her curses changed to howls of pain. When his hand began to sting with its own punishment, he set her on her feet. The dress fell into place, revealing her face, red, wet, distorted. The mathematical cadences of a quadrille drifted in through the door.

"Don't think you didn't do the girl a favour, you wicked little trollop. Now every man in town knows she has shapely legs!"

They left Gorgona at daybreak of the new year without farewell or breakfast from the alcalde. Nor had Lorita returned to the bed she was to share with Belle that night. The servants who had aided the travellers on their arrival were notably missing at their departure. Manuel and Pedro managed the portage of the trunks, and the three Americans disappeared up the river as unheralded as they had come.

During the four-hour ride to Cruces, where the river was extremely shallow and rapid, Belle shifted from one buttock to the other on the floor of the bungo. And after that, the eighteen trail miles to Panama by muleback, down ravines of slippery clay, across narrow paths alternately pitted and boulder-choked, through swamps and mud-filled gullies, peeled her down almost to the bone. But what was a raw backside compared to a poulticed heart? For wasn't Lucius kindness itself all the way to Panama? Didn't he give her the choice bits

of food? Didn't he get up in the night to tuck a blanket about her? Didn't he slip that spotted yellow orchid in her hair, letting his hand linger along the line of her cheek? And though, of course, he had had no business spanking her—her, a grown girl—wasn't it past believing that a gentleman who never did a day's work should have such strength and power in the hands he wouldn't leave off manicuring?

CHAPTER IX

TO THE AMERICAN eye, Panama in the mid-nineteenth century was as depressing as an intrusion upon an ageing celebrity—the traces of former grandeur still evident in the decay. Built on a promontory, its stone parapets crumbled on three sides into the sea. Old Moorish churches, monasteries, and convents dominated the town, their dark stone eaten and stained by weather, their bell towers broken, their arches fallen, their walls softening in the grip of jungle creepers. The rows of stuccoed houses were dingy with disrepair and vultures dotted their faded tile roofs. The streets were alleys, narrow, pocked, and smelling of urine; the gutters ran with a black mash shined by the intermittent showers. Only the mournful tolling of church bells broke the lethargic quiet. Only the spectrum reds of lantana and geranium and bougainvillaea broke the sombreness of the ruined old Spanish town.

The plaza was the heart of the city. Around its four sides ranged the cathedral, the Bishop's palace, the bank, the few good stores, the principal hotel. In one of the balconied doorways on the second floor of the Hotel Centrale leaned a disconsolate Belle, clad in a towel and a black pearl, absently picking the scabs off the bites on her legs.

What was the good of all that scampering through dark and rain and wildwood if she was going to spend her time cooped up in this bare box of a room? "Vamos Panama!" "Panama pronto!" For what?

She had known it was a mistake to leave their clothes with Manuel. He was a dear boy with eyes like plums, and she was

glad that Lucius had persuaded him to give up his boating and come to work for them in the city, but he had no more sense of time than the immortal soul, and there was no telling how long it would be before he rounded up enough mules in Cruces to bring their belongings. And would he remember to cover things up from the weather like they'd told him to? The muleteers had flatly refused to lash the heavy trunks to the mustangs, so Lucius had instructed Manuel to sew the clothes up in blankets and canvas. Manuel had nodded intelligently to his commands, but Belle was beginning to learn that the natives never said no.

Well, the clothes would come safe or they'd come sorry, fat lot she could do about it. The galling thing was that while she remained confined to the room, Lucius was off gallivanting about the town. He had managed to get his muddied things laundered and off he'd gone, promising to bring fresh clothes back for her. That was hours ago. He'd left after breakfast and if her stomach was any judge, it was already long past lunch time. She had nothing to do, no way to while away the time, and she'd slept her fill in the bed that Captain Hartstein had vacated for her. For there was still no sign of the *California* in Panama Bay, and *Falcon* passengers not only filled the hotels but had even rented rooms in the homes of such old Panamanian families as were not above turning an honest dollar. At the captain's insistence, cots had been moved into Halversen's room across the hall, and the three men, Lucius, the missionary, and the captain, had bunked in with him for the night, leaving the captain's room for Belle. However, the captain and his first mate would be returning to their ship before the day was out. They were anxious to get back to the States for another load of gold rushers, anxious too to flee Panama's pestilential climate.

She supposed that she should be grateful she hadn't taken the fever instead of fretting about being caged in. Will Backus, poor wretch, had breathed his last in Chagre, and folks said

the fever was as bad in the city. According to Captain Hartstein, a third of the Americans were seriously ill, and a few were feared to be dying. On the dresser was the handwritten list of precautions the captain had given her to avoid getting sick :

BE CAREFUL OF DRINKING WATER IN PANAMA.

AVOID THE SUN.

ESCHEW FRUITS EVEN WHEN RIPE.

EAT ORANGES ONLY IN MODERATION.

DO NOT TOUCH OYSTERS.

WEAR FLANNEL NEXT TO THE SKIN DAY AND NIGHT.

TAKE A MORNING DRAUGHT OF 2 TO 4 GRAINS OF

SULPHATE OF QUININE IN A GLASS OF WINE.

AVOID NIGHT AIR AT ALL COSTS.

AVOID OVERTIRING.

She had no intention of eating oysters—she'd as soon swallow somebody's eyeballs—and Lord knew she'd rested herself till she was bored silly, but as for all the other nonsense—well, she'd take her chances. Wear flannel next to her skin in this peevish steam? Why, a girl'd be unsightly with heat rash in no time if she took that piece of advice, and by the stars of God, what good could a measled girl do herself?

Below in the iron-fenced park, men sat stuffed into wrinkled white suits. They lolled on benches, eating from banana-leaf wrappers, smoking, reading their newspapers, very much as folks did in the parks of New York. Instead of the chestnut trees that shaded New York's downtown streets there were languid coco palms and umbrella-shaped ceibas and magnolia trees with polished leaves and giant white blossoms. Across the square, the cathedral's spires inlaid with pearl shells glistened in the sun. Its three massive double doors stood open to a constant trickle of worshippers, coming and going. Some of the black-shawled women were followed by servants bearing mats or chairs on their heads. Perhaps it was a holy day of some

sort, for the thumping of the bells was enough to pulp one's brains.

In any case, the holiness of the day did not stall commerce. People carrying lumpy shopping bags passed in and out of the stores. On the sidewalk facing the hotel was an impromptu market with canopied displays of flowers and vegetables and pottery. When the music from the church overflowed into the square both merchants and customers removed their hats and stood with bowed heads. Then the music faded and trading resumed, punctuated by sharp cries and gesticulation. To the left was a sidewalk café. The patrons were of all hues, the dark-skinned ate with the light, and their hands waved spoons and their shoulders shrugged and their heads bobbed as they conversed over the little tables. One lone customer at a table near the kerb held the reins of his horse as he sipped his drink.

A barefoot Negro leading a bullock moved aside for a carriage drawn by two black satin-rumped ponies. Here, as in New York, the poor made way for the rich, only here they took their time about it, slow-stepping in the heat.

Vendors of sweets and drinks strolled the park. A thin penny-coloured boy sauntered along with his chest out and his hands swinging, an enormous basket of breads balanced atop his head. A candle hawker made his round, a pole slung across his shoulders from which dozens of white tallow candles danced slowly, twirling from their wicks.

"Flores! Las flores!" called the flower vendors.

"Jipijapas!" called the man strung with straw hats. "Jipijapas, muy elegante, muy barato!" Very fine. Very cheap.

How she longed to be down there in the thick of the town, mingling in the living flow of the day! She thought of the times when, dressed up in Aunt Kate's calico skirt and plaid shawl, she'd hawked from the Fulton Street kerbstone, giving a wink to Dirty Dick as he strolled with the gents, and a wave to Humpback Harry smooching a ride, unknown to the driver, on the back of a hack. And oh, the fragrance of the roasted

ears of sweet corn that rose from the cedar-staved bucket on her arm! And she calling all the while:

*"Hot corn! Hot corn!
Here's your lily-white corrrrn!
'Tis buttered and hot
Just fresh from the pot!
All you that's got mon'ry——
Poor me that's got none——
Come buy my hot corn
And let me go ho-ome!"*

How long it seemed since she'd been jostled in the streets, milling and wandering, pushed and pushing, lost and yet somehow found in the surging crowd that fed and ate its own. Ah, the gay busy life she missed—the racket of the shooting galleries; the concert saloons, the cockpits; the sour wood smell of the sawdust tavern floors in the morning. She wiped a slow-rolling tear. If anybody had tried to tell her she'd get lonesome for New York!

Another carriage rolled into the square, the horses' hoofs resounding, clip-clop, clip-clop, a summer sound like the bees in Hoboken's Elysian Fields. Belle squinted to decipher the features of the rich lady sitting under a parasol between two gents. The horses slowed to a stop directly under her window. Lucius himself stepped down from the carriage. He whipped off his black slouch hat like a feather fan, his curls pale as corn tassels in the greeny yellow afternoon. The lady, smiling into her laces, wasn't black-faced at all, but creamier than even Lorita. Belle's lips set. Leave it to Lucius to start off with a grizzled old captain and come back riding with a queen in a coach and trotters, while she mouldered, naked and forgotten, in a foreign flea trap! She was debating the impulse to spit down on the pate of him when she noticed the bundle under his arm.

She answered the knock at the door with a bound, pounced on the package. "Oh, Lucius, pray God it's my laundry, for

I'm sick with the need to dart off and see the sights of the town!"

Lucius laughed, riffled her hair. "Better than that," he said. "They said mañana when I asked about your laundry. You know what that might mean. So I bought you a dress and the few necessities to go with it."

Belle inspected a red calico skirt and white cotton blouse, a camisole and panties, everything frilled with coarse cotton lace. She tossed the things on to the chair. "Nothing grand," she commented sniffily. "But it so happens I'm that desperate I'd go off in a burlap sack. This room's bleak enough to shudder a corpse. I watched you come riding in that dilsy carriage. Who were those creatures?"

"Those creatures, my dear, were Señor de Soto and his wife, one of the richest and oldest families in Panama."

"And what were you doing with them, gone all these long hours, and where'd you lose the captain? You were up to something, I can see that."

Lucius laughed, squeezed her shoulders. "I've wonderful news, little one. I've transacted a piece of business this morning that will set us up in style and at once."

"You did? Well, tell me about it." How keened up he was, he'd thrum if you flicked him! The excitement was contagious, set her bites to itching and she bent to scratch them.

"For God's sake, leave those legs alone! And sit down."

She sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed. Her buttocks were still tender.

"Fold your hands so I can see them. You'll be a mass of running sores if you keep it up. Nothing heals in this infernal climate."

She folded her hands, pressed the itching back of one leg to the other. When Lucius resumed his striding, she improved upon mere pressure by surreptitiously rubbing one leg against the other.

The captain, he said, had had an errand at the Pacific Mail offices and he had wanted to get to the bank, so they parted

company. Having established credit by the deposit of their three thousand dollars, Lucius had apprised the bank manager of the incipient gold rush to California and of their plan to open a gambling house in Panama that would cater to the travellers. The manager, warmed by the prospect of influx of American dollars, had been very co-operative. They had discussed possible sites, building costs, material, labour. Finally, the manager had suggested that Lucius meet Señor de Soto. "A scion of an old Castilian family," Lucius said, "a man of considerable property who, despite his wealth, has an unflagging interest in the acquisition of money."

Lucius swept the clothes off the chair, straddled it, leaned his arms on the back.

"The manager gave me a bank letter of introduction to De Soto. As you've noticed, I'm not one to let grass grow under my feet. The De Sotos were just sitting down to luncheon. She's a beautiful woman, but she has the saddest eyes I ever saw. Puts me in mind of a racehorse I had once. Her husband must be twice her age—maybe that's what she's sad about, poor lady. Anyway, they were exceedingly gracious. Nothing would do but that I lunch with them——"

"What did you eat?"

"Eat? Hell, I don't know. Uh—mostly chicken and rice, I guess. As I was saying, De Soto's a devious fellow. Speaks both English and French—as do most of the upper-class natives, I understand—and polite as a prince, very flowery. Every sentence begins with 'would you have the kindness' or 'if you will pardon me,' but underneath the flowers are some mighty big thorns. I know his kind, and believe me, I was on guard every minute."

"Set a thief to catch a thief," Belle giped because he'd had his lunch and she hadn't.

Lucius winked good-naturedly. "Finally, over the demitasse, De Soto stopped beating about the bush. He told me he owned a large house, vacant at present, not far from the plaza. It's difficult to rent, because it's surrounded by stores now. The

neighbourhood used to be residential but it's become commercial, which of course is perfect for a gambling house. He'd prefer to sell it, but he's hamstrung because of the uncertainty of land titles. De Soto tells me they've had such a constant political turnover that the records of the land office are in a mess. In any case——"

Chicken and rice. She could see the plump white meat peeping through a tomato sauce rich with golden bubbles, the bits of green and red peppers. Her mouth watered.

"... he'll rent it to us furnished as it is for a hundred American dollars a month and ten per cent of the take." Lucius paused for the scream, but Belle made no objection, indeed looked dreamily pleased. Relieved, he rushed on. "Now I admit that ten per cent hurts a bit, but after all, what kind of a shack could we build—and furnish—on a measly three thousand fish? And we wouldn't have much really. We need some working capital. And look at the time we'd lose. The gold rush won't last for ever. We have to do our milking while the cows are here. Now with this deal, we move right in and as soon as we round up some tables and some music, a bar and a bartender—he smashed his fist in his hand—"wham! we're ready for cash customers. I just hope we can buy a piano in this Rip van Winkle town. We'll have to get a sign made. Maybe pass out some handbills. Put some announcements of our opening in the hotel lobby, the bank, the stores." He paused thoughtfully. "What do you think of calling our place the Royal Tiger? Or the House of the Royal Tiger? Think that's too long? Belle, *are you listening?*"

"Me? Indeed I am." She frowned, tasted her lips. "The Royal Tiger. The House of the Royal Tiger. Now that's a poser."

"You get the idea, don't you? The symbol of faro—remember the royal Bengal tiger on the dealing box and on the cards?"

"I do, but——" She jumped up, hugging her midriff. "Thunder and sparbles, Lucius, I'm destroyed with hunger."

Could you tell me the rest while we sit over a bite to eat somewheres?"

"Of course, child. I'd forgotten." He rose at once, looping his leg over the chair seat. "Good Lord, you haven't had anything since breakfast. We'll go right now." He looked down at her standing there before him, tiny, forlorn, naked except for the sarong of towel. His eyes changed. He put a hand on her arm, drew her to him slowly.

"My lunch——" she reminded, hanging back. She'd been longing for this moment, her memories of the first time already threadbare, but she would not be reached for at his unpredictable convenience. She strained away from him, murmuring, "Ah, Lucius, no, no, not now," but he held her and kissed her and it was breathe the dark fire of him or not breathe at all. She could feel his heart beat against hers. (Their hearts beat the same, why then was he lord and she gillie?) His mouth forced hers open, his trousered leg worked between her bare ones, his hand spanned the buttocks he had abused, arched her to him. And thinking went down, pride went down in the smiling darkness behind her closed eyes.

There was a sudden knocking on the door. Their mouths jerked apart, but their bodies pressed together, soldered by the shock of the thundering door.

The knocking came again.

"Who is it?" Lucius called.

"That you, Talent?" Captain Hartstein's voice came through the door like the voice of the Lord. A deep primeval shame swept through Belle. The floor rocked under her tiptoes. She buried her face in Lucius' shirt. "There's some Spanish lady downstairs in a carriage to see you. Says she's got some keys for you——"

"Thanks very much, Captain. I'll be right down."

"Belle there?"

"No, she's gone out to eat, sir." His voice was firm, his arms a fortress, but surely the old God-man would know, would

punish, would bring the wrath of the world-fathers down upon them.

"Well, tell her goodbye and good luck if I don't see her. We're shoving off."

"I will, sir. See you next trip."

They stood unmoving in each other's arms, tuned to the retreating steps. They listened to their breathing in the silence. Then Belle went limp as a sack. Lucius picked her up, carried her to the bed, set her down gently. "I'm sorry, love," he whispered. "It's the keys to our gambling house. I forgot the damned things." The whisper fell warm on her closed eyes. "I'll be right back, honey. Right back, hear?"

She made no answer.

"Belie!"

He kissed her closed lips and the tip of one breast that had escaped the towelling. "I'll be right back. Wait for me, love."

She lay still on the bed until the sound of his running footsteps down the hall died away. Then, the coldness left her, displaced by a turmoil of remorse. She'd let him go unreassured, he torn between love and responsibility, and ah, the manliness of him speaking up to the captain! What had possessed her to try to fight him off in the first place—the childish measuring of her will against his? And he'd humbled himself, apologizing to her. "I'm sorry, love." "I'll be right back, honey." Where was the sound of the master in that? Was it a puppet on a string she wanted, a puppet who'd dance to her twiddling? She leaped from the bed, ran to the balcony so that her love could spill down like a ladder to him in the enemy street.

His gait was unhurried, a saunter. The woman waited, this time alone behind the rigid coachman. Lucius lounged on the door rail as if he had nothing to do but pass the time of day. Belle could hear the murmur of exchanged amenities. As she handed Lucius the large ring of keys, the woman leaned toward him with a kind of wistful yet agitated urgency, flinging glances like salt around her shoulders. She said something that

made Lucius laugh, a rich full-throated coloured balloon of a laugh. Belle crouched to the stone floor, peeped at them around a flowerpot. Sure enough, Lucius cast a quick glance upward. She had hidden herself just in time.

Lucius and the woman talked earnestly for a few minutes in such low tones that no sound carried. Their heads hung close, the woman's lips moved rapidly. Then the woman put out her hand and Lucius kissed it. The kiss seemed to Belle unending. When Lucius let go of the woman's hand, his own came away with a fluff of white that he put to his lips, then slipped under the breast of his coat.

Belle crept back into the room.

When she opened the door to Lucius' knock, she was dressed in the blouse and skirt he had brought her. Her eyes were cloudy chips of jade, and her mouth was a bee-stung lump.

"Honey——!"

"I saw you! You didn't break your rump hurrying back!"

"Oh now, Belle, be reasonable," he begged, reaching for her. "A matter of business—our landlady, after all——"

She slapped his hands down, reached into the pocket under his lapel, whipped out the small square of white lace. It hung between them, lemon-scented, guilty as the breath of a tippler. "Since when does business pass out lace kerchiefs?"

"Well, what would you have me do—refuse the token the poor lady offered me?"

"Poor lady, my eye. There's more than one way to skin a cat. She wouldn't be so free with her smelly personals if you didn't lolligag around her like the darling of the world!"

"Aw, sweetheart, now please." He reached for her again, but she punched him in the stomach and he reeled back, surprised by the strength of the blow.

She walked to the balcony threshold, crossed her arms on her chest, hugging the ache, waiting for him to embrace her, to plead with her again and again until her pride should release her. But he didn't come, and she threw a little fuel over her shoulder. "Me waiting up here shaking for you like a leaf in

the wind and you looking nine ways at once, taking your faithless time——”

“You sound like a wife,” he said in a voice so cool that she turned to look at him. He was re-tying his cravat in the mirror.

She stomped over to him. “And what if I do? Didn’t I give up my innocence to you not a fortnight ago, and didn’t we lie abed together like any man and wife?”

He looked down at her then and his scorn broke over her like a raw egg. “For a girl who’s lived on the seamy side, you’ve become as drearly sentimental as any tradesman’s daughter. ‘Give up your innocence.’ Evangelical muck! I told you before I don’t buy love—not with money nor with marriage. I consider it an even exchange, and from what I’ve noticed, you’re as eager for it as any——”

“Whisht!” She put out her hand to hush his mouth and he grabbed it.

“I won’t whisht. You listen to me, Belle McGlory. I’m a gambler, a philanthroper, a rolling stone, but I’ve tried to be fair with you in my fashion. I’m only flesh and blood and you’re the most maddeningly desirable little wench I ever encountered, but I never promised marriage or love or fidelity. I put my cards on the table at the start, and you know it.” His fingers closed tight on her arm. “I made one mistake. I thought you were different. I thought you had the courage and the spirit to live as a man does. I thought we could have each other and freedom too. I see that’s nonsense. You’re a woman and no woman is built for freedom. She doesn’t understand it, she doesn’t want it, she can’t take it. So let’s get this straight. Which will you be—my partner or my mistress? If you’re my mistress, you’ll belong to me and I’ll kill the gaffer who tries to take you from me even in marriage. But no mistress of mine will take me to task for anything I choose to do. If I want other women, I’ll have them. When, as, and if. Is that clear?”

She yanked her arm from his grasp. “Clear as the icicle that beats in your breast, you blackmouth! It’s true. I came out of

a seamy slum, as you're always so quick to remind me, but I'll live to be a lady if it kills me! Oh, I've got plans in my head, I have. From now on, it's business between us entirely. There's better things I hope for than being chippie to a banty tin-horn!"

He raised his hand—to strike her?—and then very slowly his hand lowered to smooth the back of his hair. He bowed slightly. "Neither one of us can afford the luxury of a knock-down, little one. Rest assured from now on you'll have no more of my attentions than business requires. Now freshen your face with a calabash of cold water and fix your hair and meet me in the lobby in ten minutes. I'll buy you some lunch and then I'll take you to see the house." He flipped a folded paper on to the dresser. "This is the lease. I've signed it but I want your signature on it too. An X will do if you have trouble copying your name. You'll find pen and ink in the drawer considerably provided by the management."

"Why must I sign it?"

"Just for your own protection—should anything happen to me." He put his hand on the knob. "Ten minutes, mind."

Belle looked for a long moment at the folded paper on the dresser. She felt curiously dizzy, empty, ashy-mouthed. Was she heartbroken, she wondered, or just hungry? Was Lucius a cad or a gentleman? Was she a vile-tempered shrew or a girl in love? Was the chill his last words had put on her fear for her own security or fear for his? *Should anything happen to me*, he'd said. She touched the black pearl at her throat. "Ah, don't let anything happen now—just when the future's begun."

CHAPTER X

THE HOUSE OF THE ROYAL TIGER opened for business January 7, 1849, at 8 p.m., and from the moment its grilled gates were swung aside by a groomed and booted Manuel, it became the popular night resort for Americans. Here the bored flocked for excitement, the homesick for company, the heart-sick for solace, the rich to play, the poor to watch. If you had to locate someone in a hurry, you looked first at the Tiger. If you wanted to hear or spread the latest news, you made straight for the Tiger. If you had a ticket to sell or money to raise or a bargain to strike, you conducted your business over a glass of spruce beer at the Tiger. With the money from the deal bulging in your pocket, you might take a seat at the faro table where Tiger Belle's fresh Irish beauty and fresh Irish tongue made even losing a pleasure.

Other emporia of chance sprang up from time to time—The Shingle Palace, The Mule's Tail, Monte Mike's—but they were jerry-built frame fronts or tents set up on the beach, rough dens of brawling and vice. Their food was execrable—lobscouse and dundy funk. The liquor they offered for sale was so raw that customers carried their own bottles in their boot tops, a practice that gave rise to the term "bootlegger." These fly-by-night dives drew crowds for specific reasons—poker games, cockfights, fandangos—but they did not compare nor compete with the physical comforts and the emotional exhilarations of the House of the Royal Tiger.

The house itself was of tufa stone, the volcanic rock that underlay the city, with the usual terra-cotta tile roof. It was

three-storied as were most of the better homes because it was considered salubrious to live as far from the exhalations of the ground as possible, and each storey was girded by a railed veranda. Except for the first floor, formerly used for store-rooms, which Lucius closed off altogether, the rooms were large, high-ceilinged, and airy, with cross ventilation from the front balcony and the inner patio aided by shutter-winged doors. Many of the shutters hung awry, their slats broken, the door hinges rusted with disuse, but Lucius had had to attend to first things first: the clearing of the tenebrous grounds, the whitewashing of the interior, the restoration of the kitchen from whose chimney and stove twenty-four ten-gallon pails of soot had been removed. What with repairs and the cash outlay for salaries, groceries, and minimal equipment, their nest egg had dwindled to pinhead proportions, and until the faro table could be made to cover the overhead of broken crockery, candles, sawdust, and numerous other tavern expenses, they were pinched for working capital.

On the second floor, what had once been a sedate ballroom was the main saloon, now furnished with a long bar, small tables and chairs. A square of the hardwood floor was roped off for dancing. Here, four dusky young fandango-artists sold their dances for a dollar a turn. Their more intimate favours were sold in the back bedrooms for whatever the traffic could bear. Half of their earnings reverted to the house, the other half they kept in lieu of salary.

The orchestra, which consisted of fiddle, flute, guitar, and hand drum, turned out quadrilles and reels and money-musks as well as fandangos, and since there were not enough girls to go round, the men often danced together, making the dance floor a lively and even a perilous place. Behind the orchestra was a painted velvet backdrop against which, if the faro table lacked customers, Belle entertained with songs and dances. Off-stage, her dances were not for sale. It was generally understood that she was Lucius' woman, and since all the men had

a healthy respect for Lucius' trigger finger, not even the bibulous customers troubled her.

Lucius had taken the third floor of the house for his private apartments. Belle, lest she be disturbed after working hours by the bawdier activities of the second floor, was installed in the two-storied outbuilding which had once been servants' lodgings. With her slept Nicasia, daughter of a friend of Manuel's mother, an amber-tinted girl of fifteen who waited upon her as maid.

Manuel lived in Lucius' apartments, serving as valet, door-man, food-purchaser, gossip-collector, errand-runner, and any other role by which he could prove his worth. Not that it needed proving. Without Manuel's assistance, they could never have staffed the Tiger so quickly, and, hampered as they were by language difficulties, they could scarcely have managed the marketing without him. Manuel, it seemed, had inherited the best of both races. He had the loyalty of the Indian, the warmth of the Latin, and the sharpness of the half-breed.

Everybody loved Manuel, even Benancia, the dyspeptic cook, who pandered to his youthful sweet tooth with the crisp little cookies, gaufres, that he had a fondness for. The tips Manuel received for the small favours he rendered the customers soon exceeded his salary. But to Manuel money was only the second of the many rewards of city life. First and fabulous were the leather boots Lucius had bought him. He shined them several times a day with orange peels, and like many *nouveau riche*, he worried constantly that they might be stolen. To allay Manuel's fears, Lucius had offered to buy the lad another pair, but Manuel refused this extravagance.

"A thousand thanks, your grace, but then I should have the anxiety for two pairs instead of one."

Not even in the pursuance of inner sanctum tasks could Manuel be persuaded to take off his boots, and the noise on the stone floor was often irritating. Lucius' references to Manuel's boots were so invariably irascible that Manuel presumed his phrase to be a single word, and the lad's attempts to

earn tips by offering to shine the customer's "goddamboots" became a tavern joke.

Indeed there was little about the menage of the Tiger that did not feed the febrile romanticism of the forty-niners. There was always a ripple in the saloon when Lucius Talent strolled in, dressed to the nines in top hat, broadcloth coat, plush vest, striped trousers, French-heeled boots. The sight of him, his shaven face, his elegant manner, his crisp linen and fine jewellery, made them suddenly conscious of their sweaty beards, the patches on their pants, their soiled shirtsleeves, made them glance uneasily at the lettered sign above the bar :

GENTLEMEN ARE REQUESTED TO WEAR THEIR COATS—
IF THEY HAVE THEM HANDY

This subtle edict reassured them of the acceptability of their own déshabille while at the same time it reminded them that the Tiger was no common establishment. As the proprietor-dandy leaned at the bar, lighting his pipe or sipping a brandy, they eyed his manicured hands with respect, remembering the speed with which those hands could cut a deck or cock a pistol. Their own voices dropped a pitch or two as they strained to hear what he was saying to the bartender or the men near him. He might be ordering a round of drinks on the house or he might be passing on news of a sighted ship or reporting the death of another fever victim. Whatever he had to say, they stalled a moment to hear it, for there was a sinister authority about this boss of the green baize that arrested them all, farmers, lawyers, bank clerks, blacksmiths alike.

Belle's entrance, by contrast, set off a rowdy hullabaloo.

"Tiger Belle's here!" they'd roar. "Here she comes, the lady dealer! Tiger Belle!"

"Tiger Belle herself!" Belle would war-whoop back, showman enough to realize the celebrity value of a nickname. "Now, let her rip, my boyos! Hey! Tío Carlos! Rum cobblers all around. Para todos! Be quick, old man, we're dry as fishes!"

She dominated the room, and she knew it, played her popularity like a musical instrument, revelling in her power to draw a blush or a laugh, conscious always that this was only rehearsal as she scanned the new faces for the Blackbird. The dream of him, the pretence of expecting him sustained her now that Lucius had taken to philandering. Lucius thought no one knew what he was up to—leaving orders not to be disturbed in his apartments before sundown and Señora de Soto's carriage left nearly every afternoon not a stone's throw away in front of the silversmith's, the cobbler's, the apothecary, the dry goods shop for hours at a time—but the pair of them were fooling nobody except maybe the old pocked cuckold himself. But she was done with eating her heart out, done with wetting her pillow for Lucius Talent. She had run through a spate of feelings about the affair. Jealousy, self-hate, glum melancholy, sweet melancholy, and finally, to her surprise, relief.

The truth was that life in Panama was fraught with excitement—new sights, new people, new things to do, to eat, to hear—and Belle was glad to be free to experience them in her own way. Now and then, when a perfumed breeze petted her cheek, when she saw a couple kissing in a doorway, or when she leaned on the moonlit windowsill in her nightdress, she longed for someone to love, but it was a passing hunger, easily killed by a hunk of cassava bread dipped in honey or a pillow-fight with Nicasia. No, she was in no hurry. Sooner or later the Blackbird was bound to be awash in the nightly stream of men. His shipmates had long since arrived. The rumour was that he had stayed on in Chagres because he'd run out of money. He was selling a weekly news sheet, the men said, and writing letters for those who couldn't write their own in order to earn the jungle-trip fare. But one of these nights he'd be coming to the Tiger for a bit of fun and then she'd snag him to her side. She'd treat him kindly, never raise her voice. Nor let him win her easy. And then the two of them would marry and sail off to San Francisco where no one had a past. They'd be gen-er-ly in

the new land—lace curtains, calling cards on a silver salver, a coach and pair, and politicians bowing to them in the street. . . .

On the night of January 16th the Tiger saloon thundered with male voices, crackled with beery laughter. Pistols twirled, money rolled across the bar, Yankee phrases went up from the little tables: "Busier'n Hattie's 'flea" . . . "big as a skinned elephant and twice as homely" . . . "forked that mule and rode him up to my knees in mud—never was so plumb wore out" . . . "walloped his nose flatter'n a flapjack!" Vigorous talk shouted by armed giants, adventurers, swashbucklers.

Into this formidable American camp sidled Señor de Soto, an alien on his own soil. There was no love lost between the soft-spoken indolent natives and the big noisy impetuous Americans. Most of the Argonauts had at one time or another been cold-shouldered in the native haunts, even forbidden entry to some of the more exclusive ones. There were hostile murmurs now of "spigotty," a closing of ranks at the bar, a fingering of bowie knives. Lucius materialized almost instantly. He threw a protective arm around the small man's shoulders, sat down with him at a table, ordered French brandies. But he puzzled over the reason for the visit—the rent was paid.

"As a landlord, I have been curious to see what you have done with my little house, Señor Talent. I hope your countrymen do not resent my presence."

"Of course not. You're always welcome. What do you think of the place?"

"I am greatly impressed, señor." The small black eyes blinked, the pitted cheeks filmed with oil. "The furnishings are far more elaborate than I expected. And the business—it is flourishing, no?"

"Yes, we've been lucky. Of course, it's taken work too. I'm pleased though." Lucius smiled, waiting him out.

"And this girl, Tiger Belle," De Soto said, turning the glass in his pudgy palms. "I have heard that she sings and dances with much gusto. I should be honoured to meet with her. I

have not had the pleasure to meet with an American woman, and a man enjoys to enlarge his experience, no? For the same reason, I am sure that you are finding the women of Panama a change, no, señor?"

So that was it. The old bird was warning him off. Lucius' smile was enigmatic, neither reply nor denial.

He sent for Belle.

"Pleased to meet you," Belle said, dropping a curtsy, but her eyes blanked with distaste. The man had a complexion like the stone of a peach, and the way he ogled her turned her flesh to goose-bumps; he might have been counting the teeth in a horse's mouth!

Murmuring pleasantries, De Soto fingered the pearl at her throat. Belle recoiled from his damp touch, glared rudely.

"You must forgive Belle's displeasure, Señor de Soto," Lucius apologized. "You couldn't know that she's superstitiously attached to the jewel—suffers no one to handle it."

"It is only that I have much knowledge of pearls," De Soto explained. "For many years my family exported them commercially from the Pearl Islands. I could not help to notice one so magnificent as this. If the señorita should some day have the desire to sell it, I should be pleased to purchase it for my wife."

"Oh, no," Belle cried, retreating even further from the cupidity in the shoe-button eyes. "It's not for sale."

De Soto bowed. "We say here a thing which means in English, 'Of poet and of fool we each have a little.' That the señorita should value the pearl above money is a little foolish, a little poetical, but muy simpático."

Belle excused herself. It was time, she said, to get into her costume for the show. She couldn't wait to wash the pearl with soap and water lest the touch of the toady-muzzler had put a pishogue on it.

His mission accomplished, Senor de Soto took his leave.

Lucius went to the brass rail, thoughtfully ordered another brandy. The talk swirled about him. The rising prices of the

bungos. Nostrums for dysentery. The men thanked God the rainy season had ended. Maybe now there'd be less fever. Where the devil was the *California*? A thousand Argonauts stalemated in Panama, and two more ships—the *John Benson* and the *Orus*—just anchored off San Lorenzo.

Suddenly there was a hue and clatter on the stairway and a bunch of newcomers clamoured for drinks. They were still caked with the mud of the trails, hollow-eyed with weariness, but they pounded the backs of their compatriots, shouting their good-fellowship, for the Tiger constituted some sort of journey's end. Lucius signalled to Tío Carlos, the bartender, for a round of whiskies on the house. The newcomers, pressed for word of home, pulled out dog-eared newspaper clippings that went from hand to hand.

The *Washington Globe*: "According to the statements of Colonel Richard Pillcott, recently returned from the diggings, one hundred thousand persons could not exhaust the California gold supply in ten or twelve years."

The *Boston Daily Intelligencer*: "The gains of the miners vary from one ounce to one thousand dollars per day."

The *Philadelphia Post Dispatch*: "The gold region is as large as the state of New York. . . . The only capital required for making a fortune is a spade, a tin collander and a small stock of patience and industry."

The *New York Globe*: "By January 30, 49 ships, schooners, barques, steamers, whalers, windjammers and brigs will have sailed or will be on the point of sailing for San Francisco, besides 12 for Chagres, 7 for Vera Cruz, and from other Atlantic ports for San Francisco, 65."

The news whetted everyone's hopes, everyone's tongue. Hats popped like corn into the air. Silver coins clinked on the counter and the whisky bottles gurgled as they were sent sliding from one end of the bar to the other.

When Belle came out on the stage, togged in a long-tailed green coat, green knee breeches, and green stovepipe hat for her jig and reel number, she took one look at the exuberant

crowd, signalled to the orchestra to cut the fanfare, and joined the men at the bar.

"What's up, gents? Don't tell me the *California's* hove to at last!"

"Tiger Belle!" the men shouted deliriously. They swung her up on the counter, shoved the clippings under her nose.

"What do you think of that, eh? A thousand dollars a day! Now will you marry a miner, Tiger Belle?"

"And we're still the early birds, we're still ahead of half a hundred shiploads!"

"Providing we ever get out of this sinkhole!"

"God almighty, I'll get out if I have to build me a ship with my own bare hands!"

"I'll settle for a bungo. Who'll chance the high seas with me in a fleet of bungos?"

Belle put her hands on her hips. "Faith, what a bunch of dandelion puffheads! Do you believe everything you see in the papers?"

"Better not let Jim Rideout hear you say that!" A mud-stained felt hat wagged in warning. "Lady or no, he'll cut your heart out."

"And why would he do a thing like that?"

"Because newspapers is the breath of that fella's life. Don't love gold—don't love girls—just loves his printing press to hear him tell it!"

"It's the truth," said another. "Lugged that thing on to the bungo—through the jungle—must weigh fifteen hundred pounds if it weighs one. But he made it! That there press is in Panama tonight. Rideout's probably laying asleep on it somewhere's right now."

Belle smiled. So he had come. Too tired for pleasuring tonight. But tomorrow—ah, Lucius would soon know he wasn't the shake of the bag.

"But how did he get it across the mule trail?" Lucius demanded. "Why, they wouldn't even take our trunks!"

"Well, the natives have learned it pays, I guess. Rideout

spent a small fortune on mules. Bought the strongest ones in Cruces, hitched 'em up together, strapped mattresses on their backs, loaded that consarn press on to them, and off they trekked. Saw it with our own eyes—didn't we, Sam?"

"I believe it, mister," an old-timer put in. "We saw Rideout do better'n that. Ever hear tell of the way he lifted that press out of New Orleans bay all by hisself, and swum it to the ship?"

At that moment, Manuel, perspiring, panting, ran up to Lucius, whispered in his ear.

Lucius' expression remained unchanged but he rang a glass with a spoon for silence. Then he raised both hands. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, quiet, please!" The room stilled. "This may be news or it may be rumour, but I pass it on to you for what it's worth. Manuel has just spoken with the ferryman who plies between Panama and Taboga. Some fishermen off the Pearl Islands claim to have sighted a steamer heading our way!"

"The *California*! Hooray!"

A tidal wave of voices rose and fell. Chairs and tables were overturned in the concerted rush for the door. The saloon cleared in five minutes.

Belle and Lucius sat on in the unnatural quiet, translating the news in terms of their own interests.

"Let's hope it is the *California*," Lucius said. "Its arrival is none too soon for us. The faster the turnover, the safer our dealings at the faro table. If these fellows stay much longer, they'll be on to our game in spite of our caution."

"They'll never all of them get on the *California*," swinging her green legs from the counter.

"It's the men from the *Falcon* I'd like to get rid of. Those from New York have through tickets. They're sure to get berths. But those hillbillies who came on at New Orleans—they're the ones who are beginning to bore me."

"I'm hoping there'll be room aboard for my cats," Belle confided thoughtfully.

"Your *cats*?" Lucius echoed. "Since when have you got cats?"

"Since a few days ago when I heard someone say that cats are much in demand in the mining camps. The rats, you see, are eating up the food stores and nary a cat to be sicked on to the scavengers. Twenty-five dollars a head they'll pay in California for a mouser, the way I was told. So what did I do but round up two dozen cats from the alleys of this town——"

"You did! But you told me you were afraid of cats! You said——"

"I detest them worse than the devil's backside, but don't think I did the chasing myself. I hired a couple of native lads, friends of Manuel. They'll get five American dollars for their pains and they're happy as larks with the fee. While I stand to make the tidy profit of five hundred and ninety-five dollars on the lot. Now there, Lucius Talent, you see there's some as sharp as yourself!"

Lucius slipped his arms under the green coat around her waist and grinned up at her. "I wouldn't argue that for a moment. I always said you were wise in the ways of money. And getting prettier every day too. Now if you weren't such a little tinderbox, we could be having the best of each other while we worked."

"You closed the book on all that," she said, laying her arms along his. "And maybe it's as well. This way we don't caffle."

They smiled at each other. It was a rare moment of harmony.

"Tell me, Belle, what are you going to do with the money from your cat business?"

"Buy me a carriage like that old hag De Soto rides in," was the prompt answer. "Don't think I haven't seen her sneak in here. Just because she leaves her carriage down the block——"

Lucius threw back his head and laughed. "That old hag is all of twenty-five years old. And it's not you we hide from, but town gossip. The señora is rich and amuses herself with shopping. Her carriage in the plaza provokes no upward interest.

After all, a married woman of her position has to be careful. Especially in this country. Like all Latin men, her husband is insanely jealous and like all Latin women, she's as restricted as a convict. Just so much chattel. Why, would you believe that De Soto had her *branded* the night of their marriage? An old family custom, it seems, to establish the groom's proprietary rights. I was rather shocked, I must admit—on her thigh a cruel scar in the shape of a palm leaf."

Belle kicked at his shin. "I'll thank you not to describe the thighs of your mistress to me, sir!"

"Now, now, don't fly off the handle. If it makes you feel any better, I'm winding up my affair with the sad-eyed señora. She doesn't suit me as you did. Besides, De Soto, I think, is suspicious, and as our landlord——"

Belle jumped off the counter. "So that's it! That's why I suit you better—no husband to scare you off!"

They glared at each other.

The moment of harmony had expired.

CHAPTER XI

EARLY THE NEXT morning, word reached the Tiger that the *California* had indeed dropped anchor in the bay. Belle sent Manuel to round up the boys in charge of her cats with instructions that they deliver the crate to the beach without delay. Then, downing her hot chocolate in gulps, she ordered Tío Carlos to saddle her horse. Besides having to dispose of her unusual consignment, she was eager to see the excitement on the beach.

"Aren't you a little premature with the delivery of the cats?" Lucius inquired from the upper balcony as he watched her mount her horse in the courtyard. He was still in his night-shirt, and the sight of Belle, spruce and boyish in khaki shirt and trousers, straw hat and spurred boots, amused him. "It'll very likely be a few days before the *California* is ready to sail for the gold fields."

"Maybe so. Then I'll be early. You don't get far in this world sleeping the day away," Belle reproved with the natural sanctimony of the scrubbed toward the tousled.

"Well, good luck to you. I'll keep my eyes peeled for a smart palanquin, or do you think you'll be able to afford a berlin?"

"Knowing the fancy names is not the same as having the money to buy them with," she retorted. "I'll have the laugh of you when I'm riding in my own coach!" And, squeezing her mount with her knees, she clattered out through the gates.

She smouldered as she rode. "Palanquin," "berlin." Always making her feel the greenhorn with his highfalutin words, while if he wasn't so set on squandering the hard-earned

money, she'd have a carriage already. As fast as she fleeced the chumps at the faro table, he spent the money, profligate as a lord, improving the grounds, the house, the furnishings, the food platters—all manner of frippery. Now he was after making the patio fountain spill water, which meant replacing the old rusted pipes. A pretty penny it would cost them, and for what? A bit of sprinkling that you couldn't use for wash or drink.

The sun was high and hot as she cantered through the cobbled streets. She wished she'd taken time to put a wet handkerchief in the crown of her hat. She was obliged to rein in as she rode through the market place, for here the streets were so narrow that the balconies on either side of the street almost met overhead, and housewives cluttered the passage. Festoons of metallic purple and blue-green beef hung by the yard over the shop doors, drawing more flies than customers. The sidewalks were piled with bags of meal, of dried beans, with calabashes of red peppers and palm-leaf baskets heaped with oranges. She tossed a copper to a vendor, and caught the orange he threw back. She bit into the thin rind, spat the rind to the street, and sucked the sweet juice as she rode.

As she neared the beach, a brisk northerly breeze cooled her damp curls. She looked down from the sea wall. Even doing nothing, the Americans conveyed a bustling vigour that contrasted with the passivity of the beachcombers.

More than a mile out in the bay, in the darker water, the wooden side-wheeler rested, its three masts alive with flags. A barque under large spritsail was heading landward, and just outside the breakers, several bungos stood by to ferry the passengers to shore.

Belle tied her horse to a hitching post and slid down the shale. At her request, one of the men pointed out the Pacific Mail agent, William Nelson, and Belle picked her way over the shingles to introduce herself to him.

Mr. Nelson, impeccable in buff alpaca, doffed his straw hat. "So you're the young lady Captain Hartstein spoke to me

about," he said amiably. "Meet Mr. Robinson, our new agent to San Francisco. One of these nights I'm coming over to hear some of those Irish ballads. I've heard you're as lively an entertainer as you are a faro dealer."

"A lady who deals faro!" Mr. Robinson exclaimed. "What do you know about that!"

Belle smiled brilliantly. Neither man was much for looks, but they were unmistakably gentlemen. She apologized for her trousers, explaining that she had come down on business.

"Anything I can help you with, Miss McGlory?" Mr. Nelson asked.

But when she told him about her crate of cats, he put up his hand and rolled his eyes. "I doubt if we could squeeze a sardine into the hold of the *California* on this trip. However," he added, seeing her face fall, "another one of our ships, the *Philadelphia*, should be coming into port any day now. We'll do our best to get your shipment aboard."

"But what'll I do with all those cats the meanwhile?"

Nelson smiled, patted her hand. A crate of cats—the last thing he'd expected to have to handle on this hectic morning—but Belle's frowning self-concern diverted him. "Send them to the Pacific warehouse, dear child. Mention my name and get a bill of lading."

Before Belle could thank him, he was surrounded by several imposing-looking gentlemen. Belle stood by, edged out, ignored. She could have kicked herself. Every night she prinked to the teeth for a bunch of yahoos, and now when she could have drawn the eyes of all the nabobs in town, she was dressed in vulgar khakis! What had possessed her? Some notion of dressing like a man to do a man's business, play acting. Would she never grow up?

The breeze plucked at her sombrero. She held it to her head, squinting at the bright water.

As the bungs ran aground in the shallows, beach boys waded into the surf to carry the ship's officers to dry land on their backs. The sailors with their trousers rolled above their knees

and their shoes held high, slogged through the water on their own power. Nelson and his men pressed forward through the hallooing mob to the water's edge.

"Good to see you at long last, Captain Forbes," Nelson greeted. "We've been looking for you these past two weeks."

"We were delayed in Rio. Ran out of coal," the captain told him shaking hands. He was a large, heavy-set man, deeply tanned, in battered whites and tarnished gold braid. Next to him, Nelson looked wrinkled and washed out, as if he'd been steeped too long in warm water. No question about it, Americans did not thrive in the Panama climate.

"We've got a lot of fortune hunters here that want out on your ship, Captain. In fact, as you can see, we're swamped. This business is always either too fast or too slow. You've heard about the rush to San Francisco, I suppose."

"I certainly have. In fact, we've got a load of Peruvians aboard ship, hell-bent for some of that California pay dirt. They took us by surprise at Callao."

"Throw 'em off!" yelled one of the Argonauts.

"Can't do that," Nelson spoke up. "The *California's* a common carrier, you know."

"Hell with that bull!" someone yelled. "Yankee gold for Yankees! What do you say, mates?"

There was a roar of approval. Somebody's pistol barked at the sky.

Nelson, sensing the possibility of a riot, led the captain hurriedly up the beach. "My associate, Mr. Zachrisson, is waiting at the office, Captain. We can talk there."

But the Argonauts trailed them, badgering the pair with demands for American priority on the ship. Just below the sea wall they were met by Major-General Persifer Smith, who had recently arrived in Panama with his family and staff en route to assume command of the United States military forces in California.

"What's the shooting about?" the general asked.

The harassed Nelson explained the misfortune of having sold a third of the *California's* berths to the Peruvians.

The general was as indignant as the Argonauts.

"I say kick the foreigners off," he boomed. "We've got to get our men out of this pesthole. It's your bounden duty to make room for American citizens."

Nelson replied with icy control. "As United States consul to Panama, I deplore this inflammatory kind of talk. As agent for Pacific Mail, I'll remind you, sir, that we abide by the law. The law regarding precedence on common carriers is first come, first served. We make neither racial nor national distinctions."

General Smith flushed at the public reprimand. "I'll remind you, Mr. Nelson, of another law, the law against trespassers on the public lands. As a commanding officer of the United States Army, I'll be damned if I'll allow a bunch of Peruvians to carry off gold that belongs to our people. If you insist on shipping them out, I promise you they'll starve when they get there. I'll take this up with Washington! I'll order my men to exclude them—and maybe all foreigners—from the diggings!"

The cheers were interspersed with the boos of those who had bought through tickets at the Pacific Mail offices in the States. The latter were relieved to hear Nelson voice his intention of adhering to the laws of trade and transport instead of submitting to the will of the pack. If held tickets were not to be honoured, then priority would go to rank or power or bribe money, and their tickets would not be worth the paper they were printed on.

Belle's attention was diverted by hoofbeats. She looked up to the sea wall, saw a man dismounting from a white horse. As he loped toward the beach, she recognized him and her heart began to pound. Jim Rideout—none other, she'd seen him clear through the ship's glass. To be caught in khakis when the Blackbird showed at last! The devil with the cats, she decided, and she muscled through the rabble, making for her horse.

"Do what you want when you get to California," Nelson

was shouting. "But while I'm agent here, tickets will be honoured regardless of race, creed, or colour!"

Boos and cheers. Pushing and shoving, and then, within seconds, fists flying. Pairs of men locked in combat, rolled and kicked in the sand. Belle, caught in the melee, was pummelled from all sides. At this moment the boys she had hired descended to the beach, each bearing an end of the crate of cats. Dedicated to Belle's promise of five dollars upon delivery, the boys bore down through the wrestling men, determined to set their burden at her feet. They had almost reached her when some of the battlers crashed into the crate. The slats went to pieces and twenty-four squalling cats, wild from imprisonment, streaked hither and yon. Belle stood screaming, stiff with panic, and when one of the animals jumped her, she fainted dead away.

When she struggled back to consciousness, she was lying flat, sandwiched between heat and hard ground. A thin gauze of fear hung across her mind, veiling recall, and she lay for a moment without opening her eyes.

"I think she's coming to. The colour's coming back into her face." The voice was young, resonant.

"Just frightened. I don't think she was struck or bitten. A few scratches——" An older voice, hurried, bossy. Mr. Nelson? And then she remembered. The fights. The *cats*!

"There," said the young one, pleased. "She just shuddered."

"See to her, will you? Maybe I can get some police down here to break it up—the hoodlums!"

"Right, sir. I'll take care of the girl."

She peeped through her lids. The young man was squeezing water from a handkerchief. Her eyes flew open. Glory be to God, the Blackbird, and she lying flabby as a blob of lard! She snapped her eyes shut, felt the cool wrung-out cloth on her forehead. Time, she needed time, to think, to pull herself together, to say the right thing. In spite of herself, she drew a shaky breath.

"You're all right, miss. Don't be afraid."

She raised her head, fluttered her lids, then gave him what she hoped was a piteous look. "Dear me, where am I?" she falsettoed delicately. "Oh, kind sir——" A cat whisked by her. "Holy Cripes!" Belle shrieked and hid her face in his checkered shirt.

"Easy there. It's only a cat."

Clumsily, his arms went around her, but she pounded his shoulders with her fists.

"I hate the bloody things! Get me away from here, I tell you! Get me away!"

He lifted her up in his arms, swung her on to the saddle. He jumped up behind her, and flicking both sides of the animal's neck with the gathered reins, he sent the horse into a gallop.

As she jogged snugly against him, the wind of their motion cooling her sticky body, her hysteria sank to muddled despair. She had lost her hat. Her horse would surely be stolen. The cats would either run back to the homes where they belonged or find their way to the jungle. And as for the Blackbird, she'd cursed him and struck him—ah, for God's sake, that the light of this morning had never slivered her slumber! She felt her stiff face. Her fingers came away with blood and dirt on their tips. She wouldn't steal a glance at him because she didn't want him to look at her. They rode in silence.

"Where do you live, miss?" he asked, nearing the plaza.

She told him.

"How do you feel?"

"Destroyed."

"You'll be all right. You had a fright. Take it easy for a few hours when you get home. Take care of those scratches."

"I've been a great trouble to you."

"Not at all, Miss—uh——?"

"Belle McGlory."

"A pleasure, Miss McGlory. I'm Jim Rideout."

"It's there on the right. The House of the Royal Tiger. Where the sign is on the gate."

"Oh. The hotel you're staying at?"

"No, the gambling house where I work." She slid down the horse's steaming belly before he could dismount. "Good day to you," she said, keeping her head down, and she ran up the path, around the main house to the courtyard.

Lucius was helping Tío Carlos to raise water from the well. She ran past them.

"Hey," Lucius called, "what's the hurry? How was ——?"

He caught her arm, swung her about. "Why, you're crying, little one! You're bleeding! What happened to your face?"

"My mother stepped on it when I was a sucklebrat. Now leave go, you great blabbing brute, or I'll knock the head off you!"

Her door slammed behind her.

"H'm!" Lucius said, scratching his whiskered jaw. And then, "Let the bucket go, Uncle Charlie, and hop down to the bay double-quick. I don't know what went amiss with Miss Belle but there's no sense in losing a good horse."

CHAPTER XII

THAT EVENING THE saloon at the Tiger was all but deserted. Lucius fretted. What was the reason for the sudden boycott? Did Belle know? Was she perhaps even the cause? She had remained closeted in her room all day, refusing to see him—or anyone. He had laid her behaviour to sulks. Could she have said or done something to put the men off?

He sent for Nicasia, ordered her to ask Belle if she were ill or in trouble of some kind. Had he offended her? Had anything happened that morning at the beach that might explain the falling off of trade? “Talk to her through the door if she won’t let you in. I must know.”

“These things I will say in the best way I can,” promised Nicasia.

Lucius followed the girl into the courtyard, cooled his heels along the oleanders that hedged the stucco face of the out-building in which Belle lived. If Belle refused to talk to Nicasia, he’d go up and ram the door in. Bad enough to have a woman for a partner, but an ill-tempered one, God help him!

He stopped pacing, quieted by the unresisting twilight. A lone star blinked in the darkening sky. Birds called to each other, waited, received answers. Below their sprightly exchange, like women being loved, the doves moaned huskily, again and again. He stood still, keyed to the almost visible activity initiated by the change of light—day flowers closing and night flowers opening, worms wriggling up and little animals burrowing down and lizards speeding through the cooling grass on nocturnal business. He felt a kinship with the

night creatures. He had always loved the dark, even as a child. To him the eye of day had always been somewhat inhibiting, like that of a parent, while the darkness was a benign presence, permissive, protective.

"Sick is it?" Belle's speech ripped the fabric of tropical dusk. "I'm sick all right, and you can tell him as much. Tell him I'm sick enough to wish I was dead, for I hate myself like the scum of the world! And tell him I hate him too! And tell him I hate the blasted Tiger and the dirty dealing and the dirty stealing and the murdering, the whoring and the guzzling and the swilling that goes on nightly in this den of the devil! Tell him it might be the hand of God that's holding back the suckers. And maybe this is just the beginning. Maybe there's all kinds of punishment in store for the wicked low-living thieves that we are. Now get along with you, lass, get away, you too, for you're just a heathen like the rest or you wouldn't be tending me, and I'm sick of the sight of every damned one of you"—there was the crack of an object hitting a hard surface and then a splintering as of glass—"and the sight of my own evil face as well!"

When the tirade ended in sobbing, Lucius stroked his moustache thoughtfully. What could have happened to turn Belle not only against herself but against her means of getting rich? Obviously there was something she wanted and couldn't have. Something that money couldn't buy. Respectability, a clean conscience, but to what end? And why now?

Nicasia came to him, sleek head down, small hands clasped. She took a deep breath. "The señorita begs forgiveness, your grace, for not receiving you. It is only that a girl does not enjoy to see a man when she is pained by the cramps of the stomach. The señorita regrets that she does not know why the men do not come this night to the casa."

"Thank you, Nicasia. The translation was admirable, if somewhat free. Did the mirror break?"

"Into a thousand——" The girl's head came up sharply.

Her eyes gleamed moist in the half-light. "I know nothing of a mirror, your grace."

"All right, child. Find Manuel now and send him to me in the saloon. And bring Miss Belle some supper. Something she especially likes. There's nothing like a good supper to discourage suicide."

In the saloon Lucius sipped a brandy. Earlier that evening there had been five or six customers. Two remained. Drunk already, they were only half-hearted in their fondling of Estelita, a fandango girl. The other three girls idled over soft drinks at a corner table. One played with a cat; two of them pored over an arrangement of cards. Lucius tapped his foot on the brass rail. Food going to waste in the kitchen, candles burning, and the girls telling each other's fortunes! He took out his watch. The orchestra would soon arrive. He toyed with the idea of giving them the night off. Still, if customers trooped in late, found neither card playing nor music——

Manuel came in. Lucius grilled him. But beyond the retelling of the fight at the beach, Manuel had nothing to offer.

"Well, dammit, go on out and find out! Scour the town, keep your eyes and ears open! And don't come back till you know what's up. I'll be waiting."

Lucius turned to the bartender. "Another brandy, Uncle Charlie. To restore my perspective. I'm becoming a shopkeeper. An over-anxious, penny-pinching shopkeeper. *Muy malo*, no?"

Tío Carlos' raisin-face broke into pieces, showing two broken brown teeth in a shining bed of red. "Si, si, *muy malo*," he echoed, for there was nothing the master could say that he would not agree with. Into an existence bereft of everything but hope of heaven, the all-compassionate Dios had sent the two Norteamericanos, the Golden One and the little Tiger, and overnight they had restored value and dignity to an aging beggar. If the master said a thing was bad, it was bad, and one could only pray as one polished one's beautiful drinking glasses that the bad would soon pass.

Manuel was back before Talent had finished his second brandy. He reported that the Argonauts were convened in public meeting at the American Hotel.

Lucius took up his gold-tipped malacca cane. He checked the angle of his stovepipe hat in the long mirror above the bar. As his hand came away from the brim, the cane on his wrist struck the free lunch platter, knocking a few pieces of sausage and cheese to the floor. "Get this up, Manuel," he ordered, stepping around the fallen food. "Too many cockroaches as it is. If anyone wants me I'll be at the American Hotel."

To Lucius' surprise, the mass meeting of some three hundred or more gold rushers in the so-called ballroom of the American Hotel was proceeding with utmost decorum. He took a seat in the back row of camp chairs.

On the stage at the front of the room sat several elderly gentlemen in black frock coats. Front and centre was occupied by a young man of outsize and good looks whom Lucius recognized as Rideout of printing-press fame. Obviously a leader in spite of his youth, and therefore a man whose acquaintance it would be good business to make. As he had often said to Belle, charm the shepherd and the sheep will follow.

A nasal-voiced Louisianian paused to spit an arched stream of tobacco juice into the aisle, then went on, "... and I am here to state, suhs, that the agreement for passage made by the Atlantic passenguhs was long previous——"

Scratch a man, find an orator. Lucius smothered a yawn. The argument concerned seventy-five places on the *California* which had been sold to Peruvians and to which the Americans felt they had prior rights. It became clear that not a single Peruvian had dared to disembark for sightseeing and diversion—it would be a matter of carrying them off the ship if the nationalists should win—and lesser provocation could start a colour riot in Panama.

Lucius rose and got the nod from Rideout.

He strode from his rear seat down the middle aisle, up on to

the stage. "Gentlemen, I know you are tiring of speeches, and I will be brief." He shot his cuffs, smiled, grew serious. "As most of you know, I am a tavern keeper in the town. My interest in the disposition of the *California's* berths is thus clearly non-partisan. It is, however, with regret and pain that I see my countrymen engaged in civil strife. The blackened eyes and swollen lips and gashed cheeks that I see before me only go to prove the madness that the quest for gold creates in good men. My friends, greed and self-interest will work against you in the end. And disorderly conduct will set the natives against us all. If you will entrust the mediation of this affair to me, I will undertake to wait upon the principal parties—the Pacific Mail agents, Captain Forbes, and General Smith. I have the temerity to promise an acceptable solution by eight o'clock tomorrow night at the House of the Royal Tiger. Come one, come all—and until nine o'clock the drinks will be on the house!"

A large lean cur dog got up from his corner and rubbed his nose on Lucius' leg, his long curled tail swinging. A volley of applause startled the dog. He barked into it. Lucius bent slightly to stroke the dog's head. The dog ceased barking, regarded Talent slavishly, licked his trouser leg.

"They say dogs'n children kin pick out a good man!" somebody shouted.

"'Ray for Talent!" the men hollered, only too willing to shift their burdens to a benevolent master.

"'Ray for the Tiger!"

The men on the stage pumped Talent's hand. They had been appointed a mediation committee, but they would gladly turn the matter over to him for the next twenty-four hours. Meanwhile, they heartily commended his public spirit.

Someone from the floor began to sing, "Jolly good fellow," and the chorus swelled. "Talent's a jolly good fellow, oh, he's a jolly good fellow; Talent's a jolly good fellow, that nobody can deny!" And there were sceptics in the crowd who doubted the good fellowship of the dude gambler with the velour hat and

the painted vest, they were no less pleased than the gulls at the prospect of free drinks. A man could get powerful drunk in an hour!

Lucius shook hands with the moderator.

"Glad to know you sir," the young man said. "I'm Jeremiah Rideout from Boston."

"You managed the meeting vëry well, Mr. Rideout," Lucius complimented, repressing his annoyance at the fellow's height. "Who called it?"

"After that fracas on the beach this morning, I suggested that an open meeting might help to clear the air."

They followed the crowd out of the hall, chatting as they went. They stopped under a street lamp to which a white horse was tied.

"We'll see more of each other, I hope," Lucius said. "Where are you staying?"

"I'm not in the town," Rideout told him, stroking the neck of his horse. "I can't afford the hotel rates here, but some enterprising Yankees have built a shack on a savanna about a half mile beyond the landgates. For fifty cents a day they provide a hammock strung up in the grove and a breakfast of muddy coffee and hard bread. This will do me until I can make enough money for passage to San Francisco."

"And how do you propose to earn the money?"

"By starting an American newspaper. I think the men will welcome a round-up of news. They did in Chagres, and Panama's got a lot more potential customers. I plan to have the first issue out by Saturday. You'll want a copy of the *Panama Bugle*, Mr. Talent. The report of your affair tomorrow night will make the lead story of the first edition."

"Fine. The Tiger can use the publicity."

"You made a pretty glib promise tonight, sir. How do you propose to settle the argument?"

Lucius lit his pipe. The smoke plumed in the lamplight. "Oh, I don't know. I'm sure something can be worked out. I find that compromise is the better part of valour, don't you?"

"No, I can't say I do, sir. There's right and there's wrong. You can waste a lot of time and motion on appeasement."

Lucius, who ordinarily made as much distinction between right and wrong as a light-sleeping dreamer, looked up. The handsome young face gained a craggy maturity from the shadows cast by the street lamp, and Lucius felt a stirring of annoyance, a slightly badgered envy of—what? His youth, his size, his confidence?

"Who, in this case, do you consider right?" Lucius inquired.

"Why, the agents for Pacific Mail, of course. General Smith hasn't got a leg to stand on."

"Maybe so, but riots aren't quelled by clapping one side on the back and kicking the backsides of the other. Not in a town where frontier justice prevails."

"Frontier justice is a poor substitute for law and order."

"You sound like a reformer."

"I guess all new papermen, like preachers, are reformers at heart."

"Odd," Lucius commented dryly, "I never thought of newspapermen in that light. Nor have I much use for preachers. My own inclination is to leave the world as it is. But if it's trouble you're after, I guess you can find it here as well as any place."

"You twist my meaning, sir. I don't seek trouble, but I don't shirk it either. I don't fight if I can help it. When you're as big as I am, you learn not to. I prefer to do my fighting with a pen, but one isn't always in a position to choose the weapons."

"Why not?"

"Well, for instance, a man writes an editorial exposing an unfair business practice. The next thing he knows, he's beating off brickbats."

"Is that why you left Boston?"

Rideout tamped the street ordure with the toe of his boot. "I don't happen to be a hothead, Mr. Talen, but I should

think it would be dangerous practice, asking a stranger what made him decide to go travelling."

Lucius felt his neck go hot inside the folds of his cravat. Damn the boy, keeping him on the defensive. "I'm sorry if I seemed prying. I only asked because you don't seem like the ordinary type of gold rusher."

"Is there an ordinary type? I doubt it. As for gold, I'll let the other fellow find it. I don't want to be the richest man in San Francisco, just the best newspaperman."

One last try. "We seem to have a great deal to talk about, Jim Rideout. How about coming over to the Tiger for a nightcap?"

"No thanks. I have no head for liquor." But the invitation had broken the tension, and Rideout went on in friendlier tones, "Besides, I'm dead for sleep. That trans-isthmus trip just about did me in. Bessie and I had a rough time of it."

"Your wife is with you?"

Rideout grinned. "No, Bessie's my printing press. Best girl a fellow ever had. No fuss, no feathers. Supports me well, never talks back. Good old Bess."

"I happened to be on the *Falcon* when you hefted her out of the water. That was quite a feat."

"Couldn't let her drown. She's all I've got in the world. Say, by the way, Mr. Talent, how's Miss McGlory tonight?"

"Belle?"

"Yes, the girl who works for you."

"How do you know her?"

"I brought her home today. She fainted during the fight at the beach this morning. I thought at first she'd been hit by a random fist—they were really flying—but I guess it was the shock of the cats breaking loose."

"So that was it! I heard some of the story. Not from Belle, though. She hasn't ventured out of her room all day. But I understand from her maidservant that she sustained no physical injury."

"A working girl with a maidservant?"

"Belle doesn't work for me. Where'd you get that idea? She's my partner. She deals faro."

"No!"

"Why should that surprise you?"

"She seemed—I don't know—too nice a girl to be a gambler."

"May I remind you that gambling is my profession?"

"I know, but a girl—!" Rideout chuckled softly, reminiscently. "She certainly hates cats."

Lucius pursed his mouth in the dark, putting two and two together. If he knew Belle, there was a thing she hated worse than cats and that was being rescued by a handsome young Galahad when she wasn't dressed up.

"I have a sister who's like that about birds," Rideout continued. "Scared stiff of feathers."

"Women are strange creatures."

"They certainly are. That's why I stick to old Bess."

"Still, there are certain desirable feminine attributes that your Bess doesn't have."

Rideout's laugh rolled out like a red carpet, spanning the distance between them, isolating at last the one thing they had in common—their gender.

They shook hands and bade each other an affable good night.

Rideout mounted his horse, rode off.

Lucius crossed the square, lost in thought, Jeremiah Rideout. Jeremiah. An apt name. A preacher, using a printing press instead of a pulpit. Lucius knew the type. Always embarked on some "clean-up" campaign. In no time at all, he'd be writing editorials against gambling. He'd become a crusader, snooping and spying until he had enough evidence to expose them all. Lucius could see the unpleasant little drama unfold. At first people would ignore the editorials. Everybody hated being told what to do and what not to do. But they'd read them because everybody liked to be scolded for his sins.

Then they'd get interested in the claims of skulduggery. Everybody hated being played for a sucker. There'd be rabble-rousing speeches, mass raids on the saloons, tables overturned, bottles smashed, torches set to buildings, and finally, gamblers swinging from the trees in some coconut grove. He'd seen it happen before. Twice. Once in Natchez-under-the-Hill. And more recently, in New York. . . ."

The Tiger saloon was empty except for Tío Carlos, valiantly polishing glasses, and the three fandango girls, playing cards. Lucius told them to put out the lights and close up for the night. Tomorrow, he promised them, there'd be more business than they could handle.

Manuel was asleep in his hammock when Lucius entered his apartments. The boy lay curled in embryonic position, naked except for the boots. Lucius threw a light cover over him.

As Lucius sat down to take off his own boots, a piece of sausage fell from one. He remembered his cane's hitting the lunch platter. He thought of the stray dog's infatuation and of the men's sentimental reaction to it, and he chuckled aloud. He'd already won the assembly with his promise of free drinks, but it was nice persuasion. Too bad Belle was in such a foul humour—it was the kind of joke she'd have appreciated. The kind of joke Rideout would have abhorred. Abruptly the juxtaposition of the two of them in his mind erased his merriment. Rideout was not only handsome but *young*. And Belle's tantrum of conscience—wasn't it a little strong, wasn't it lasting a little long to be discounted as wounded vanity?

Lucius sat for a long time holding his boot. It looked like he was going to have to get more than just the *Falcon's* company shipped out of town. Looked like Rideout might find his fare sooner than he thought.

CHAPTER XIII

BELLE WOKE TO the braying of burros in the courtyard. She ran down in her nightdress. "Que hay, Tío Carlos? What's the to-do?"

Tío Carlos was unloading a double-panniered donkey. "Fiesta con mucho," he said, turning, happily revealing both teeth. "Fiesta muy grande. Mucho dinero para todos. Manuel will be rewarded with a horse. Think of it patróna. Manuelito, the son of my sister, will own a horse before he has reached the size of a man! Válgame Dios, what a day—what a blessed day!" Emotion made the old man's nose run. He wiped it with his fingers which in turn he wiped on the tail of the donkey.

Fiesta? she wondered, her eyes slitted to the shimmering cobbles. Why? What was the occasion? Ah, it never paid to be highhanded with that scheming King of Clubs.

She ran to the main house.

In the kitchen Benancia was holding cantankerous sway over a dozen chattering girls. Despite the backchat and the heat and the crowding and the flies, a prodigious amount of food was in work. One girl rolled dough out on banana leaves, one plucked turkeys, one chopped peppers. One filled cornhusk wrappers with tamale paste while another tied them with strings. A huge vat of tomatoes boiled on the stove, sent up bubbling jets of red juice. Skillets simmered with saffron-coloured rice. Pans of crusty cassava bread. Smell of singed feathers, of spiced wine, of sweet plantains baking.

Benancia's answer was the same as Tío Carlos': fiesta tonight. Muy grande. Belle stuffed a chunk of wa: 1 bread into her

mouth, took a banana in one hand and a persimmon in the other, and wandered off in her nightgown to find Manuel. Manuel always knew everything.

"Manuel! Hey, Manuel!" she hollered through the resounding stone halls.

The furniture had been removed from the saloon. Only the faro table and the musicians' racks remained. Sawdust and grass mats covered the hardwood floor. Belle dropped the banana peel into a stone jar, pattered out to the balcony. The garden was as busy as an anthill in storage time. Men were carrying chairs and tables on their heads. Others were planting five-foot-tall black iron candlesticks along the flagged walk and in the lawn. A yoked candle vendor went about filling the sconces with long white tapers. The orchestra boys with up-raised palmetto brooms threatened children and beggars off the high walls and away from the gates.

Belle caught sight of two black braids on a bent back in the calla lily bed. She swallowed the last of the banana.

"Yoo-hoo, Nicasia!"

Nicasia turned and smiled and waved. She picked up a load of cut callas and came up the stone stairs.

"Que hay, Nicasia? Donde esta Manuel?"

Manuel was gone for the day on business of much importance, Nicasia said, and setting down her burden of lilies, she struck off on the fingers of her left hand the four-pointed message. Uno. The Señorita Belle must appear that evening in her most fanciful gown. Dos. A thousand Norteamericanos had the invitation to dine at the Tiger. Tres. He, Manuel, was less than an eyelash away from the ownership of a black horse and a saddle of silver. Quatro. Señor Talent would return at sundown.

One thousand Norteamericanos. Belle tasted the words thoughtfully. Surely then, the Blackbird too?

She spent the morning lolling in the marble tub that was sunk in the ground at the rear end of the property. It was thickly screened with trees and creepers and protected on two sides by stone wall, but she could hear the beggars on the other

side of the wall, calling for bread. Nicasia sat sewing under the old pepper tree. Twice she got up and spoke at the wall. "Go to the gates of the courtyard. Benancia will give you bread. Go, old ones. Do not call here. You disturb her grace."

She was a good girl, really a dear girl, Belle thought, regretting her outburst of the day before. It wasn't Nicasia's fault that she had lost her taste for the Tiger and its wicked enterprises. Nor in all fairness could the fault be laid to Lucius. Hadn't he tried to shed her in the port of New Orleans and for her own good? The truth was she'd been raised to bad and she'd hitherto followed it like a calling. Like other young girls, she had minded her elders, but with elders such as Uncle Paddy and Lucius Talent, the learning was not of curtsies and soft speech and handcraft but of cheating and lying and thieving, and up to now she'd wished for no better. Now, however, was another kettle of clams. Now all at once she was done with elders, was in plain fact on the way to becoming an elder herself. Because she had fallen in love, truly in love, and she knew this by the pain of it.

Lucius mayhap had unlocked her body, shown her the unsuspected bliss it could yield, but it was the Blackbird who had unlocked her heart—the way she had to hold her hand over it or it would spill out of her in a river of tears. Indeed, heartsore, she had tossed and turned the night through, fighting the need to run out across the square into the cathedral and fall down on her knees before the priest. But she did not dare to confess. Lucius had warned her against blasting off her mouth even to a servant of God, for by saving herself she might be delivering him up—especially in this alien city—and much as she wished to be free of him, she balked at doing him a harm. Besides, she doubted even the priest could cleanse her, since in the questioning and the answering it would surely come out that were things turned around, were she the good one and the Blackbird the bad, she'd still yearn to follow him. This was something that a priest, not being a woman, would be hard put to understand.

She trailed her fingers in and out of the rose petals with which Nicasia had perfumed her bath. There was no end to Nicasia's store of niceties. She made concoctions to remove spots from silks, to bleach and stiffen cambric ruffles. She made face powder from pulverized eggshells and powder puffs from the breast feathers of geese. She made a lip salve from betel drupe, a body lotion from the milky juice of certain weeds, a tisane of orange leaves and herbs that eased headache and menstrual cramps. She knew that black velvet bands at the wrists made the hands look delicate, that a wax candle placed in a handbox turned yellow while the white bonnet alongside it remained bright as new. She scented Belle's linen by placing it over a wicker scone under which incense smoked in an earthenware pot. She painted Belle's finger- and toenails with the white of bird's egg to give them strength and lustre. If only, Belle sighed, a little such spit and polish could spruce up the soul as well.

"Please to come out of the water now," Nicasia said, holding a towel for her mistress. "See how the skin of your fingers puckers like dried figs."

Belle lifted herself out of the tub, stood for a moment in the sun, dripping on the stones. She ran her hands down her water-jewelled flanks, put a hand to the dark triangle of hair springy as moss. Love of her nakedness cheered her. She reminded herself that the Lord had birthed her on a holy day, had blessed her with the luck and the pluck of the Irish. It was possible she'd angered Him by putting these gifts in Satan's way, but in that case Satan must love her well and his power was not to be sneezed at either.

"The fat bag of tricks, you have, Nicasia," she said, winding herself in the towel, "the way you mix herbs and weeds and things. Do you know how to make love potions?"

"Of magic, I know nothing, patróna. Is it the Golden One you wish to entice?"

"Is it not?"

"Yet he is a most savoury man, I think—no?"

"He is, but my heart's slipped into another's pocket. It came over me yesterday like a spell and that accounts for the gloom I was in. It's a hard thing to explain, a hard thing. Young as you are, Nicasia, were you ever in love yourself?"

"I will tell you a secret, Tigrita. Once Ramon, the cousin of Manuel, put his hand inside my blouse and at the same time he kissed my lips."

"Oh, my. Well, how it happened to me was a great dark lad on a fine white horse came riding out of the sky. I fainted at the sight of him, and he swung me up on his saddle and we rode through the wind of noon, he and I."

"Ramon said afterwards a thing to me that I think of each day. He said, 'Take care, my little tuberoses, lest the bees devour you.'

"Ah, what a lovely thing. A poetic thing. And my ride with the Blackbird was a poem entirely. There was his broad hard-muscled chest catching the wispy weight of me and my hair blowing back soft against his cheek. The while he held me, the church bells rang out a fairy tune instead of their usual jangling and clanging, and the smell of orange blossom was as strong rum in the air——"

"I have thought many times that I would be glad to be wife to Ramon. I have thought how I could cook for him and wash his shirts and I could make the candles for him to sell in the square, for I have been taught the art to make candles. I have thought we could build a small house at the edge of the town. I would put pots of geraniums on either side of the door. We would have a goat——"

"The bells and the wind and the blinding noon sun made a world around the two of us, and I smiled up at him like he was the jewel of the world, and he leaned down and he put his lips in the cup of my hand."

"It is not impossible that he will ask for my hand in marriage before I am many days older. I will of course not accept at once——"

"Maybe he'll come here tonight——"

"I'll see him tomorrow at Mass——"

They slipped their arms around each other's waists.

"Never breathe these things to a living soul."

"I cross my heart. May I die if I do."

They lunched without tasting, their eyes aglow with dream, and they lay afterwards side by side on the cool pineapple-linen sheets of Belle's bed. The drone of bees came through the shutters, and the swish-swish of the gardener's scythe. A ribbon of gold on the sill was struck now and then by the breeze-blown slat.

"Have you ever thought, Tigrita, how it will be to lie with your man on the night of the wedding?"

Belle stiffened, her heart closed like a fist inside her. That too. Adultery. Poor thing, she'd have to drug him with drink on that night, or he'd know, he'd know. "Who me? Well now, I never give it a thought——"

"I have heard it said that it is painful to the woman at first."

"Is that what they say? But why do you suppose it should be a pain to the woman and a pleasure to the man?"

"Because, little mistress, the woman's place is hidden behind a curtain of skin—did you not know that?—and this skin must be broken by the lover's entrance. It is a thrust like a knife. The woman cries out, and she bleeds."

"No!"

"Oh, but the pain is only at first. Later, más tarde, if the man is gentle, the girl learns to take pleasure from the thrust."

"Now how in the world did you come to know these things?" Belle asked, hoping against hope.

"From the lips of my mother," Nicasia said. "Did you and your mother never speak of these things?"

Belle was suddenly released from the guilt of original sin by the defection of the Holy Ghost, for wasn't it Himself who had robbed her of her mother? "My mother was taken the day I came into the world."

Nicasia bolted up. Her eyes were big with tears as she cupped Belle's face with her hands.

"Ai—ai, hermanita mía. Can you find the kindness to forgive my clumsy questions? I weep for the death of your mother."

"Ah, it's a cruel thing to be born and brought up in a motherless world, Nicasia. And many's the time I prayed I could join her."

There was the sudden clatter of hoofs in the courtyard. Belle flew from Nicasia's embrace, peered tearlessly through the slats. "He's come at last, Beelzebub himself. And us talking the sun right down to its bed. Where did the time go to, will you answer me that? Quick, Nicasia, help me dress."

"Si, si, I will help you. Tonight you will be the flower of perfection, this I promise. Ah, hermanita, I will tell you something, I have envied the beauty of your face. Look at me, I am plain. Truly until Ramon kissed me, I feared it was my destiny to dress saints. That is the occupation of many old maids in my country."

"Never. You've a darling face, Nicasia, the face of my first and only girl friend."

"A thousand thanks, most gracious one. And you—with eyelashes like yours, you will never need a fan——"

"Hey there, Belle!" Lucius called from below.

Their hands flew to their mouths. How titillating the master's voice, the master who, all unknowing, had that day been interred in the graveyard of fathers.

"Belle, dammit, answer me! Are you there? I've bought a present for you."

Belle poked her head through the shutters.

"A present—for me? Dear man, what could it be?"

"Come up to my apartments, and you'll see. That is, if you're over your sulks."

"I'm feeling better now, thank you kindly. Overslept myself is why I'm not yet dressed. Will I jump into some trousers and come now and dress later?"

"Yes, yes, do that."

"But what's all the celebration for? I'm wild with guessing."

"Serves you right. If you hadn't locked yourself up, I'd have told you last night. Now, hurry, there's no time to spare."

When Lucius called "Come!" to her knock on his door a few minutes later, she found him in the middle of the floor, standing with both feet on a new black beaver hat.

"Have you lost your mind altogether?"

He jumped down, grinning, and for a moment, because she was giving him up, she prized the litheness and the blitheness and the golden look of him, and she felt a pang of loss.

"That," he said, "is the way to tell a good hat. If it's properly made, it holds a man's weight. This one comes from France, and as you'll see, it's well worth the extravagance." He picked up the hat, buffed the rim with his underarm, slapped it on his head. "There. How do you like it?"

"Fine," she said somewhat abstractedly, looking about. "It becomes you."

"Now wait," he said. "Watch closely now."

He removed the hat, upended it, and pressing her fingers to a spring under the ribbon at the base of the crown, he showed how a false bottom rose in three stages to close the inside by half.

"Tsk. What people don't think of!"

"Nice place to cache money or secret papers, eh?"

"Safe as a tomb, I'd say. And where's mine?"

He opened his clothes cupboard, took out a three-foot-high whalebone frame, shaped like a canary cage. "This, my dear. Straight from Paris."

Her face fell, her lower lip went out. "Well, if that's not a joke and a half," she said. "And me certain you'd brought a necklace or at the least, a cameo brooch."

"A hoop for your skirt, Belle. Instead of all those petticoats. It's the latest thing."

She touched its uncompromising struts. "A prison, to my mind."

"Fashion has decreed wider skirts. All the ladies of Paris are wearing them. The style has not yet reached the United States,

and you, little one, are the first lady in Panama to own one."

She lifted the hoop. It was none too light a weight. "And where will it go when I sit down?"

"You can practise the management of it in your room. See here, it ties with tapes at the back of the waist. Nicasia will help you. I'd like you to wear it tonight, Belle, for the sake of showmanship. A year from now, when these men are dining in the great hotels of San Francisco, they'll see the society ladies in hoopskirts and they'll remember Tiger Belle as an innovator. It's things like this that will make you and the House of the Royal Tiger famous from coast to coast."

"Then I'll wear it, of course. Now, for the love of God, will you tell me about the shindig tonight?"

He gave her a brief account of the meeting of the night before and of his promise to the men. "The steamship line is being extremely co-operative. But that stiff-necked goat of a general—he won't give an inch. Not that he matters too much at the moment. He can't dictate to Pacific Mail, and what he does when he gets to California is no concern of ours. Our aim is to get the *Falcon* men on the high seas with all speed, and the dispatch of this has been left in my hands. Though I suspect your new friend will be around to police things. He was at the conference this afternoon——"

"My new friend?"

"Yes. Jim Rideout."

"Why style him my friend?"

"Because he asked after you. He told me of your encounter yesterday. And that he took you home." Lucius frowned. "He's planning to start a newspaper in Panama—for Americans. He takes his work very seriously. Quite a firebrand."

Belle suddenly felt afraid of Lucius, of the cold keenness of the man. "You'll not pull any tricks then, Lucius, with him on the lookout. You do have a plan for solving the mess fair and square? I mean, if he's the firebrand you say. We don't want a Donnybrook here tonight."

"Don't worry, I'll handle it." He grinned, clucked her chin.

"Now run and dress, there's a good girl. And meet me in the saloon. I've things to tell you."

The gay mood he was in, and the hurry, she decided to break the news. She took a deep breath. "Lucius, there's a thing I must tell *you*——"

"Not now, little one." He put the hoop in her hands, pushed her out. "Later. Have to dress—a thousand things to do——"

He closed the door on her and she shouted through it. "You must find a new faro partner, Lucius, for I'll deal to the suckers no more!"

She fled with the hoop down the hall.

Every American in Panama except those whose fevers kept them confined to their beds was present in the gardens of the House of the Royal Tiger by dusk that evening.

Bottles of whisky, opened, free, stood in the centre of each table. Trays of spiked punch were passed again and again.

When the cathedral bells tolled the eighth hour, Manuel appeared on the front balcony to light the hanging faroles, candles in glass shades. Then Lucius Talent, in dove-grey trousers, black frock coat, white taffeta cravat, and grey topper, stepped out on the balcony. He was flanked by Captain Forbes in navy whites and the general's downy-cheeked aide in army issue that still bore the creases of the packing box. From Lucius' relaxed, omnipotent mien, one would not have guessed that he was smarting at the note the general had sent explaining that after due consideration he and Mrs. Smith had agreed that his appearance at a "notorious dance house" would be unseemly.

Holding up his hand for silence, Lucius assured the assembly that the counsels of moderation had prevailed. Captain Forbes, he informed them, was present to read the official compromise of the Pacific Mail Steamship Line. "We regret," he went on smoothly, "that Major-General Smith cannot appear here in person. As you know, the general is travelling with his family, and the missus is unwilling to let him come to a stag party at a

place well known for the beauty of its girls and the strength of its whisky." The men cheered. "In his absence I present the general's aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Thomas Hawkfly, who, still unfettered by the bonds of matrimony, is able to follow the call of duty even when the call leads to Panama's first palace of pleasure—the House of the Royal Tiger!"

The men roared their acknowledgement of their own freedom.

The flustered young man read from the rattling paper in his hand:

"As nothing can be more unjust and unreasonable than for persons not citizens of the United States to dig the gold found in California, on lands belonging to the American government, and as such conduct is in direct violation to the laws, it will be my duty immediately upon arrival to prevent infraction thereof, and in future to punish those who violate them. Signed, Persifer F. Smith, Major General, United States Army, Commanding Pacific Military Division."

Cheers rose from the dusk below, and Lucius quickly presented Captain Forbes before the malcontents could create disturbance. Forbes cleared his throat, bellowed: "Mr. William Nelson of Pacific Mail has given me the assurance that the *Falcon's* original company of twenty-nine—all of whom hold through tickets on the *California*—have been assigned berths." Cheers. "For each foreigner already aboard, the *California* will take on an extra American. The Peruvians have gladly agreed to double up." Cheers and catcalls. "Remaining vacancies will be disbursed tonight on these grounds by means of lottery draw. Those who draw numbers from one to one hundred forty-eight and who also have the price of passage—two hundred dollars—are as good as on their way to the gold fields." Cheers. "The rest of you will be accommodated on the *Philadelphia* and the *Niagara*, which are due from the east at any moment."

A fanfare from the orchestra maintained order.

Lucius draped a leg over the railing. He took out his gun and laid it on his leg.

"Gentlemen," he said, "Tiger Belle will now pass among you with two of my best plug hats—each of which the honest and honourable Mr. Jeremiah Rideout has duly inspected."

And so he had, thought Belle with a pang as she stood in the stair well, awaiting her cue. The poor dear innocent, what did he know of false bottoms and hidden springs? and would to God she knew as little.

"I'm here," Lucius was saying, "to see those hats don't get mussed up. Stay in your places. Belle will come to you. Stay where you are. The man who rushes Belle might not live to rush gold."

Belle's appearance on the front steps drew a few bald sniggers—it wasn't every day one saw a little girl locked in such a fantastic structure of apparel—but not a man in the garden broke the decorum. She glided down the flagstone path, bearing Talent's well-known buff topper in the crook of her left arm and in her right, the new black one from Paris. "Nothing could be simpler," Lucius had told her. "The black hat holds the winners, the buff the duds. As you approach an old shipmate, you lean to proffer the black. To the others, you make the buff one accessible. Perfectly fair, after all, the *Falcon* men were here first. And—uh, Belle honey—you might just flirt a little and keep up a line of patter, you're a delight when you act winsome." He had taken hold of her and then he'd looked into her eyes. "As for Rideout, he's not our sort. The sooner he's gone, the safer we'll be. I caution you—offer him the black. Once he's got the ticket, I'll see he gets the fare." Her chin had gone up then and her eyes blazed defiance. Lucius had dropped his hands. "So it's like that, is it? Well, listen to me, Belle. I intend to fight to keep you, and"—he gave a little laugh over his shoulder as he turned away—"you know I never feel obliged to fight fair." She had made up her mind there and then. She'd dip to the Blackbird with the winners. He should go off before Lucius could queer her chances with him. But what was to prevent her tooling right after him on the next ship or so? San Francisco wasn't all that big. She'd

locate him fast enough, and when she did, then, ah then *she'd* be laughing over her shoulder and Lucius'd be left holding the empty bag for all his cleverness. She moved swiftly from man to man. "Don't dawdle," Lucius had warned. "Don't give them a chance to get restless." She bent this way and that, diverting the blear-eyed with winks and sallies, the clear-eyed with peeps into her low-cut gown, aware with every pose, every shallow breath, that from some shadowy corner of the garden the Blackbird watched.

As indeed he did. Watched, unbelieving, scornful with disappointment. Was this the girl, trim and slim as a peeled birch wand, who'd clung to him till the pounding of his own heart had robbed him of the beat of hers? This the defenceless sprite who fainted at the whisk of a cat, whose invasion of his sleep this morning had kept him in bed an extra hour? This swivelling Irish jade who smirked and prinked and displayed her bosom? And that costume! She was a launched ship of green tarlatan, bow and stern scalloped with purple bunting, port-holed at gulping intervals with red roses the size of cabbages. And that hat! The small face was a mere hub in the green satin wheel from which smoked purple and red feather plumes. He thought of his mother and his sisters in their modest alpacas, their demure bonnets, and he groaned aloud, and then chided himself for thinking of them in the same breath with this little bog weed. For all their tendency to linger at the Peabody shop and argue Transcendentalism, his sisters were gentlewomen. Tiger Belle, a pretty little Patty now, would soon in this environment be a tough grasping harpy who'd do anything for gold. It was too bad, a young girl like that in a wolf trap like this. But then, it was nothing to him. He'd dreamed about her, what of that? Any fellow who'd been put in the Sir Galahad position he'd been in yesterday might do the same. It only proved he was human, which his sisters claimed to doubt. Jiminy, the stream of eligible Boston daughters they'd loosed on him! Not one of them, from the simpering dolls to the bucktoothed man-eaters, had stirred

him enough to essay a kiss. He had no gift for talk over a tea-cup and no wish to learn to mince to music. Like his father, the renowned judge, he believed a man's work was a man's life. Some day, like his father, he would take a wife and raise a family, that was a man's obligation to his country if not to the human race. But when he did, it would be a woman of breeding, amiable, competent, modest, a helpmeet who could share a man's problems as well as his bed. As to her appearance, she need not be handsome, merely pleasant looking and of good height. Small girls never felt like equals somehow, more like toys or children, and he was physically uneasy with them as if he might inadvertently step on or break them.

He was thus engaged in designing a mate for himself when, to his confusion, he saw Belle making straight for him. She'd caught his eye and she was dodging in and out of tables, her skirts pitching like a cutter in the trough of a gale. But when she stood tiny before him, he forgot the outlandish trimmings, saw only the vivid pansy face, and heard, or rather overheard, for his heart had become a drum again, the lilting water-fresh voice.

"Good evening to you, Mr. Rideout. Will you kindly give a draw?"

"Me—uh—no thanks, I'm only here to report the news."

"Ah, go on, please."

"They're all gone," he said, peering.

"No, there's one left, in the black here, see?"

"Oh. Well, anyway, I don't have the fare."

"Then I'll lend it to you. I'm not a poor girl, you know. And you can send me the money back, you a fine newspaperman in San Francisco."

He laughed nervously. "You sound eager to get rid of me."

"Oh, no. No such thing——"

"Don't have to coax *me*!" said a chap nearby. He went into the black plug to his elbow, and a second later, shouted his triumph.

"That was the last!" Belle moaned, sinking into a chair.

Rideout caught the tumbling hats, set them on the table. "You're not going to faint again, Miss Belle?"

"I do feel queer."

He grabbed a glass off a waiter's tray, held the glass to her lips. She hesitated, then gulped it down. She gave him a dazzling tear-bright smile "That's it then, the fat's in the fire." And she whipped the cartwheel off her head, sent it sailing over her shoulder into the crowd.

"That stuff must have quite a kick to it," he said, astonished.

"Have one and see!"

He started to say that he didn't drink, but he had an impulse to show off, and he stalked a waiter, took a glass, downed it, and wheeled back to set the empty glass before her. He set it down too hard. The stem broke and the bowl rolled to the grass. "Whoops—that might cut someone," he said, embarrassed, picking up the shards.

"Is it your first, lad?" she asked softly. "The drink, I mean."

"Oh, my, no," he lied, and added recklessly, "How about a dance, Miss Belle?"

"In this cage I'm wearing?"

"Take it off."

"All right, I will."

Lucius, astride the balcony, saw Belle and Rideout enter the house, and his knuckles shone on his gun handle. The fool, the damned little fool, she was not going to let the fellow go. No, it was he who was the fool. He should have foreseen this. If it hadn't been Rideout, it would have been someone else. It could so easily have been avoided. A little love, a little praise. Warped by the old pattern of sadism, he had denied her both. Well, it was not too late. He hadn't begun to fight.

"Manuel," he called testily. "Bring me a brandy—a double."

Below him, a frenzied bidding had developed for the lucky numbers.

"I'll give you five hundred cash for your chance at a ticket, hombray."

"Here's six. Who'll take six hundred fish?"

"Make it seven and number one zero one is yours!"

"Seven it is, cash on the line!"

"I'll take one for eight. Who'll sell for eight hundred American?"

"You got a deal, man. Fork over with eight!"

The quick profit instead of the main chance. The night before the same man would have killed anyone who tried to take his place on the first ship out. But in the candlebright garden, with greenbacks changing hands and free whisky sloshing down gullets, the gold fields seemed far away.

Money that came easy would go easy, Lucius reflected. The faro table would soon get a lively play. Belle couldn't welch now—not tonight. He'd think of some persuasion. And if persuasion failed, then threat. Suddenly he tensed, peering at the wall. It seemed to him he had caught the shadow of a man running. But the wall was spiked with shards of glass, how could a man run along it? Nevertheless, when Manuel brought his brandy, he directed him to make a tour of the grounds and to go through the rooms of the house to see if anything was amiss.

Manuel returned to report that all was serene. He held a light to Talent's pipe. There was a wail, a human sound.

"What's that?"

Manuel smiled. "The hoot owl, your grace."

They listened together. It came again. "Whoo—whoo!"

"That's an answer," Lucius said tightly.

"A mocking-bird only. It has almost but not quite the sound of the owl."

Lucius shrugged, feeling sheepish. It had been a long day. He had missed his siesta. He had also, he recalled now, missed his lunch. "Tell them to serve the supper, Manuel. Pronto."

The cathedral bells tolled ten. The garden began to empty, the men seeking the diversions within the house. Lucius slid off the railing. He stretched, yawned, went into the saloon.

Huge platters of food were set out on sawhorse tables. Lucius filled a plate for himself, ate it standing up near the ropes of the dance floor, watching, observing. Belle was jogging about with Rideout, who, Lucius noted with satisfaction, was remarkably clumsy—a bear in boots. Not that Belle seemed to mind, she was breaking her neck to smile up at him. She had dispensed with the hoop, a practicality for which he was inclined to forgive her until his eye found it encompassing a stone jar of calla lilies. Several of the men danced together. The fandango girls went from one pair of arms to another. Each time a girl lifted her skirts to add a greenback to the roll in her stocking, the bystanders hooted.

"Once around the floor only, Beelee," he heard Estelita say. "One time, one dolla. My time ees my money."

"The Panameños learn fast," he laughed to a man beside him.

"And that Estelita's the least trusting I ever encountered," the man said. "I paid for more than a dance the other night and she kept her knife in her hand the whole durn time. Knife in bed makes me right edgy."

Behind the bar Tío Carlos hopped about like a zoo monkey hustling for Sunday peanuts.

The red-necked Jeb Jarvis, bold with brandy, hurdled the sagging rope, forced through the couples, tugged at Belle's arm. "How come you sashayin' with this stranger? Thought you said the gambler was only one could tote you——"

Instantly Lucius was between the two men, an arm around Jarvis' shoulders, a restraining hand on Rideout's clenched fist. "Tiger Belle's through dancing for the night, Jarvis. Faro game coming up. Care to play?"

"Sure would. Just sold my chance on the *California*—got money to burn!"

"Better give me a hundred of it to hold for you. Seventy-five'll buy you a ticket on the *Philadelphia*. We want to be sure you get out of Panama."

"Mighty friendly of you, Mr. Talent, look out for me like

that." Jarvis handed over a hundred-dollar bill. "I might fool you though and win."

"You have to get up early in the morning to win from Tiger Bell. Mr. Rideout, will you excuse my dealer for a while?"

"Certainly." The faro game was, Rideout told himself, worth staying for. Now that the lottery was over, he might well be back in his rooms, getting out the first issue of the *Panama Bugle*, but an editorial on the pitfalls that gambling held for the waylaid traveller would be timely, and a few hours at the gaming table would give him the material he needed. "I'd like to watch if I may."

"I'm not dealing tonight, Lucius," Belle said.

Belle moved close to Rideout, almost leaning, and he felt her trembling—or was he imagining it?

"Oh? You're not?" Lucius asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I am not. I told you as much this afternoon."

He was not imagining it. Even her voice shook. Afraid of that sharper? Rideout slipped a hand under her elbow. Let him bully her, he prayed exultantly, oh, let him bully her.

As if he had read Rideout's mind, Talent's face wreathed with smile, and there was no constraint, rather a boyish exuberance in his voice as he said, "Very well, then, I'll deal myself. Come on, Jarvis, old boy, how would you like to keep the case?"

Belle's eyes followed Talent's back. She stayed close to Rideout's side and he saw in her face no lessening of tension. "He didn't seem to mind your refusal," Rideout said to soothe her.

"Mind? Not that one. He's the unluckiest gambler that ever was born and nothing relishes him more than a chance to lose."

"Oh, come now. For a loser, he's pretty prosperous."

"Isn't he just?" She flung Rideout a grim blind look and moved away.

He ran after her, hurriedly urged supper.

"No, thanks, you go on," she said vaguely.

"Please, Miss Belle, did I say something wrong?"

"No, no," she said, patting his arm absent-mindedly. "But it doesn't do for me to hang about with one person too long, do you see, bad for business. I'm bound to circulate."

"Oh."

He watched her walk off, wrestling with himself. He decided the paper could wait. One night more or less—what did it matter? It wasn't as if he had any competition. He ran after her again, caught her arm. "Belle, listen!" he pleaded. "Let's go out on the town. See Panama. So far I've seen nothing but Americans."

"No more have I."

"Then what do you say? I'll buy you supper in a native place. Maybe a boat ride——"

"Ah, it's sweet of you, Jim Rideout, but I can't go. I have a number to do later—a song and a bit of a dance for the boys."

"We'll be back for it. We'll just eat and come back."

He saw her glance toward the faro table.

"I better not, but I thank you all the same."

He pushed her from him roughly. "Afraid of cats, that's one thing. But afraid of a popinjay gambler—well, you must have good reason. It's obvious you're not free. I bid you good night."

She caught up with him in the garden.

"I am free, Jim, free as a bird and eager to be on the wing!"

Pride forced a frown. "Are you sure about that?"

"Hope to die!" crossing herself.

Her glance back at the second-story window drew his too. Lucius was stacking chips on the table, head bent.

He started at the elbow in his ribs, looked down into her merry face.

"Well, what are we stalling for?" She picked up her skirts. "Where to shall we fly?"

CHAPTER XIV

THEY FOUND A café named La Mariposa. It was small, stuffed to bursting with music and dark laughter and body heat. Men with shining faces and white teeth played bamboo sticks and marimbas and vine-strung poles. The women danced with pipes in their mouths and their partners made circles around them, stamping and clapping their hands above their heads.

They ordered at length and scarcely touched the strange foods. Lobsters cooked in seaweed and cream. Enchiladas muy piquante. Honeypaste wrapped in leaves. They sipped cool tamarind juice from scraped gourds, and the candle between them made mirrors of their eyes.

A vendor came up to their table with a board of bronze fire beetles. "Cucuyos," he said, leering, "for the señorita to pin on her gown. All the Panama girls wear them."

"Cucuyos," Belle echoed, enchanted.

"We'll have one," Jim said, and his hand made a jingle in his pocket.

The tiny headlights glowed green on her breast and the tail-lights glowed yellow.

"But doesn't the pin hurt him, poor thing?"

"Evidently not. Look at him flash. He knows he's on to a good thing."

"Jim!"

They rode the white horse to the beach.

They took off their shoes and their stockings and they walked the strand where the sand was white and fine, and the

air smelled bracingly of salt. They walked all the way to the thicket and they walked back. Now and then they bumped against each other in seeming accident.

They sat on the sea wall, idly watching the lights of the *California* where the work of refitting went on day and night. The moon and the skyful of stars and the phosphorescent surf were small gifts which in their preoccupation they accepted as their due, barely remarking them. They said very little, wary of words, tremulous with restraint.

Ultimately Jim slid an arm around her waist. When she didn't move away, he took one of her hands and held it. After a while she turned an unsmiling face up to him and he brushed her lips with his. She let her head drop on his chest and he fined his breathing lest she hear the storm brew under her cheek. He waited—seconds, minutes, hours?—until she raised her head again. He missed her mouth and blushed in the dark, but she slid her arms around his neck and, heartened, he held her tightly in place while he kissed her fully, manfully, as he had that morning in dreams.

"Jim—the cucuyo— we're crushing him!"

They pulled apart, but miraculously the lights on her gown still glowed.

"We might have killed him."

"I forgot."

"Set him free—do."

He tried to unpin her.

She giggled. "Here, Butterfingers, let me."

But she was no better. Their hands touched, fumbling, now on fabric, now on flesh, and they began to laugh softly, hysterically, at the helplessness that had come over them. Somehow they managed to release the fractious wire and the beetle was set on course. They watched him scuttle off, tender, heroic as parents, until the darkness ate up the last of the blink.

By and by they slipped off the wall and his coat made an island for them in the sand and the sky put a tent over them and the sound of the waves built a wall around them. Or by the

church bells, pious chaperones, jarred their privacy. Each time the hour rang out, Belle fluttered like a bird at a human noise.

"We've got to go, Jim. It's late. Oh, it's late."

"Yes, we do. We have to get you back."

"I always knew you'd have brown eyes."

"Have I? I never noticed. Yours are green. Green as sham-rocks."

And in this way, they settled down to each other again.

In the end it was not the church bells that broke the spell. It was the Blackbird himself.

"I love you, Belle," he said.

She laid a firm finger across his lips.

He kissed the hushing fingertip. "You know what else?"

"Not another word."

"But I have to tell you. I never did have a drink before. Never danced before. I never even kissed a girl before. You're the first."

"Ah, Jim."

"What about you?"

"What?"

"Who—I mean—have you kissed anyone else—like this?"

There they came, as she had known they would—the menacing past and the headless future, cast up like monsters on the sweet safe shore. She jumped up, began to brush the sand from her skirt. "I'm off now—this instant."

He got up too, gripped her shoulders. "Do you love me?"

"Ah, Jim, Jim darling, it's too soon to say. We barely know one another."

"It's not soon. I've known you for twenty years. I knew you the minute I saw you."

"What you don't know would fill a book, lad. Cripes—there go the bloody bells. I vow they could wring water from a stone and I'm that happy I'm liable to bawl."

He smiled, relieved. Women cried, he knew that. He had three sisters and a flock of girl-cousins and he'd seen them cry over the darndest things—a piece of good news, a birthday

present, a dime novel. "Home you go, then. I don't want you to cry."

But she did, and it was he, not the church bells, that drew her tears. He wrapped her in his coat and carried her to the top of the wall and she cried gently against him all the way.

"It's that you treat me so dear," she sniffed, replying to his dismay. "Covering me up and carrying me about like I was a baby. I'm not used to it, and it saddens me."

They kissed lingeringly once more on the top of the wall. And they kissed again inside the gates of the House of the Royal Tiger. They were in each other's arms when three horsemen thundered out of the courtyard and passed them in a wind.

"They're going north—to the landgate. A getaway pace if I ever heard one!"

"They could be robbers," Belle said, stiff with alarm. "Did you mind the bars?"

"Think I'll have a look," he said, swinging to his horse.

She hung her weight on his arm. "No—you'll get hurt. It's folly—no, Jim!"

He shook her off. "I just want to see where—they'll go out the Old Panama Road—I know it—ride it every day. Let go, honey—l——"

"You know the road but they know the hills—natives, I saw!"

"I'll keep my distance, don't worry—run in!"

"No—I'll not!" But she couldn't hold him. He was on his horse, his heels pounding the animal's flanks. Horseshoes struck like hammers on the cobbled square. North—this time she too could hear the direction. Afterwards, the stillness was bland, edged with the first pink of morning. Birds twittered in the ghostly trees as if perched on springs. The chill of the dew-soaked grass rose like fear through her slippers. She turned and ran. As she crossed the veranda, the snores of the sotted sleepers scratched the surface of her stoned mind. Lucius always saw to it that the drunken ones were carried into the storerooms—

their "velvet rooms"—to sleep it off, for to lie all night on the damp ground was to flirt with fever. So, she thought, the dirty thieves waited until the party was over.

On the stairs her legs ached, refusing the speed she demanded of them. A stitch in her side further slowed her down. It was a long time since she had had to run against her body's will. The familiarity of it, the dreadful familiarity increased her foreboding. Something worse than a robbery had happened, was happening, would happen! Something that had to do with Jim. She would lose him, she felt it in her bones, had known it from the start. Hadn't she kissed him goodbye the while she kissed him hello?

The saloon wore its ravages with patient dignity. Many a gaudy night had splashed its walls, many a pink dawn had lit its despoilment. Ballroom or dance hall, Spaniard, American—what difference? The sawdust lay on its ancient hardwood floor, tracked and grey as if skaters had ridden it to slush. The candles were gutted, a few flames still winking feeble golden eyes in the twilight. A drunk lay sprawled over a rum barrel. From the ugly look of the back of his neck she thought it must be Jarvis, and she pulled his shoulder, intending to roll him over and lay him down flat. It was Jarvis to be sure—not drunk. Dead. Her hand came away from his shirt sticky with blood that was not quite cold. Dazedly, she wiped her hand on her skirt. A muffled sound woke her and she followed it to the anteroom between the saloon and the kitchen, the little parlour where they kept the safe.

There Lucius lay bound and gagged, wriggling on the narrow sofa. The safe in the panelled wall was agape—empty—its iron door sagging on the hinge as if a man had swung on it. And under the safe, amid a red-stained fall of gold and silver and greenbacks, lay Tío Carlos, a knife beside his curling and uncurling open hand.

"Mother of God!" she cried, running to the old man.

Lucius' growl diverted her. His wild eyes gave an unmistak-

able command. She ran to him, tugged unavailingly at the knots in his gag. His head jerked impatiently toward the knife on the floor. But even with the knife, she had to go carefully because the gag sliced hard inside his open mouth and the knots under his ear permitted no leverage.

"Hold still," Belle wept. "You want your throat cut?"

When the kerchief fell away, Lucius' eyes held her fast while he puckered and swallowed, working up the saliva for speech. "Hands next. I'll do my legs. Uncle Charlie—stomach—bleeding to death."

She cut Lucius' hands free, and, while he flexed them, his legs and his ankles. Then they worked in silence. Stripped to her bodice and pantaloons, Belle tore her petticoats into strips which she handed down to Lucius who packed the old man's wound. The jets were quickly stanchd but the cambric turned red almost instantly. As fast as Lucius added wads, they turned red.

"Will I run to get a doctor?"

Tío Carlos moved grey lips. "Do not trouble, querida. It is my time to go. Yo no tengo miedo."

Belle took the old man's moist hand, rough and black as lava rock, held it to her cheek. A second later, he screamed and his hand jerked from hers and clutched at the packing. They stood by helplessly. The spasm of pain seemed to ease. The old man beckoned Lucius who leaned close. "You helped me to live like a man, patrón. Will you not help me to die like one?"

Lucius straightened slowly. His hand went to his holster and he cursed softly, finding it empty. From a drawer in the small fruitwood desk, he took a pearl-handled pistol.

"No!" Belle screamed. "You dassn't!"

Lucius cocked the trigger, pointed the pistol above and to the left of the bloodsoaked cloths.

"Gracias——" The grey lips moved without sound. Tío Carlos closed his eyes.

Belle hid her face in her hands. There was no report. There

was the brown smell. And then there was the silence—the same ancient patient silence that had struck her earlier in the saloon. Houses lived on after men. Everybody was alone. She heard her sobbing as if it were coming from someone else. It beat the silence like a whip and the raw sound was a comfort to her.

Lucius cuffed her lightly. "Be still!"

She held her breath.

From deep in the house came a knocking or a kicking. Lucius ran out. She started after him, but it seemed indelicate to abandon Tío Carlos so soon, and she sat down on the edge of the sofa, cold-spined, eyes on the doorway. Lucius returned with Manuel. The boy was livid, his lips lavender. At the sight of his uncle, he fell on his knees.

"Manuel was locked in the pantry cupboard," Lucius told her in an aside. "He's not hurt, they didn't hurt him. As he said, he's lucky he had his boots on or we'd never have heard him. He'd have suffocated."

Manuel wheeled and his eyes flashed with anger. "You shot him. Who are you to do God's work?"

Lucius backed away. He lowered his head.

Lucius hanging his head, Belle thought, stricken—that she'd lived to see the day. But she couldn't bear it. "Manuel, are you daft? The man was in mortal pain. It was a matter of moments. Surely you——"

But Manuel was as shocked at Lucius' defencelessness as she. "Forgive me, your grace. It is grief that speaks, not sense. You have been most kind to my family and to me. This I know well."

"Thank you, Manuel. I am glad you don't hold it against me."

"Nicasia!" Belle cried, reminded.

"She is no doubt asleep in her bed," Manuel said bitterly. "Tío Carlos is an old man. He sleeps lightly. No doubt he heard something and he came back. Nicasia sleeps hard. She

would naturally hear nothing except maybe the voice of Ramon in her dreams."

"Take it easy, boy," Lucius said, patting the thin shoulders. "Come, give me a hand with him."

The man and the boy carried the body out of the room.

Alone again, Belle sat quietly, drained and sad. She thought of the Blackbird and the beetle and the kisses. Was it only last night she had strutted the beach like a peahen, believing every saint in the sky had his ear to her heart, listening for the wishes that might be ticking out?

Lucius returned with a glass of brandy.

"I'm dizzy enough without spirits, Lucius."

"Drink it—a swallow anyway."

"No. I'm all right."

"You have one more shock coming, little one. Jeb Jarvis. They got him too. I just found him in the saloon."

"I know that," she said dully. "I saw him when I came in. It's a shame. He was such a decent lad."

"Poor devil," Lucius said. "I sent him home over an hour ago. But he was in the plush. He must have gone back with one of the girls. If he'd left when I——"

"We were bidding good night in the garden, Jim and I, when three men rode out on horses. Jim went after them."

"Only three—eh? I didn't know. You see, I was in here. I was about to lock up the safe when they came up behind me. Hit me on the head. I don't remember being tied."

"And Tío Carlos was helping you?"

"No. I was alone. Tío Carlos had gone to bed. As Manuel said, he must have heard something and come back. Maybe the horses in the courtyard. I—uh—there was no take tonight, Belle. I bucked the tiger and I lost. I was returning the bag from which I paid off."

"Well, at least they didn't get away with much. Joke's on them, robbing us on a losing night, if a body had the heart to laugh at all." She frowned suddenly. "But, Lucius, they were

loaded. I saw their horses. I saw them weighed down with sacks and each sack as fat as a sack of potatoes."

"That's right, Belle. We're cleaned."

"But the *bank*—you kept all but the small change in the bank!"

"I did, but I took it out last week on the advice of De Soto. De Soto says there's talk of revolution. Panama City's been asleep. Now it's booming, there's upheaval. In case of revolution, money isn't safe in the bank. Rebel governments have been known to confiscate property and even private funds. After all, this isn't New York——"

"That pocked pig in a field—that mealmouth, you minded him?"

"Of course, why not?" he snapped impatiently. "De Soto may not be a bonnie Prince Charlie but he's one of the most important men in Panama. Besides, it's to his interest to keep me solvent. He not only gets rent from us every month, but he gets ten per cent of our take."

She sighed noisily. "Either way you look at it, we're broke again."

"We are, undeniably that. And you can't welch on me now, Belle. I intend to write to this lady friend of mine in New Orleans. I believe I can persuade her to come here to take your place. But meanwhile——"

"Oh, no. I can't. I can't, Lucius. I'll sing and I'll dance and I'll drum up trade. I'll be the casekeeper if you want. But don't ask me to deal the crooked cards."

The pale Gabriel face might have been carved of snow. Points of light sparkled coldly from the blue eyes like sun-struck ice. She chafed her hands, trying to remember that those thin lips had once pressed hers, but the memory was incredible, even repellent. "Lucius, be kind. Help me. Try to understand. I want my hands to be clean."

"I understand perfectly, my dear. Out till dawn with the honourable Mr. Rideout. You want clean hands to stroke him with. Oh, I understand, but I don't think you do. You see

those bloodstained coins on the floor? That's all there is. Fortunately, our credit is good. We can function on credit till our cash builds up again, but our cash comes from one place—the faro table. Oh, I could deal all right, but not for long. Some sorehead would plug me sure. Why do you think I had to beat it out of New York? It's different with you. The suckers lose their money and maybe their hearts but they don't lose their heads. Your luck is legend now. They expect it, they accept it. When you're doing the dealing, they're pigeons with popguns in their belts. So that's the way it's got to be, Belle. You made a bargain with me and I'm holding you to it. Business is business. I'll release you as soon as I get someone else, but until then, you're going to deal."

She jumped up, hands on hips, chin out. "So bloody glib, you and that sword blade of a tongue in your head. And suppose I refuse to dance to your hornpipe?"

He gave her a Jack Frost grin. "I don't think you will."

"Oh, you don't eh? And why don't you?"

"Because if you're a sensible girl," he said softly, smiling warmly now, "he may never find out about you. Whereas if you're stubborn, I'll see that he's completely informed."

She flew at him, going after the smile, but in less than a moment, he collected her fists in one of his, and then his other hand began to slap her face from side to side, again and again, until she was driven back to her seat on the couch.

"Oh, you blackguard, you vile blackguard," she wept behind her hands. "I'd have better stood in a Cow Bay slum than ever took up with the likes of you."

"You can't fight destiny, Belle."

"Can't fight the devil, you mean. Sometimes I wonder why I was born."

"What is it, Manuel?" Lucius asked.

Belle looked up. Manuel drooped in the doorway.

"Do not weep for him, Tigrita," Manuel said. "Save your eyes. Pity will not bring him back."

"You wanted something, Manuel?" Lucius repeated.

"With your permission, your grace, I will go now to the house of my mother. I will take with me the body of my uncle for the aunts to wash and dress. I have looked at Nicasia. She is sleeping well. Naturally."

The ache of her own heart made Belle alert to his. Not only grieving for his uncle, but longing for comfort from little Nicasia. She had had no inkling. Everybody considered Manuel a child. Nobody noticed he was growing up. Look at the fine dark down on his lip, and his neck thickening like a pony's. She jumped up and hugged him. "Don't let your heart go black, lad. We'll give him a gorgeous funeral, we will. There'll be carriages galore and you'll ride at the head of them on your fine black horse and all over heaven it'll be known that Tío Carlos was highly thought of in his home town."

Manuel had gone home to his mother.

Belle had gone to her bed.

Lucius, unable to sleep, paced the creaking balcony, punished himself with view and review of the trampled garden. It was maddening to be penniless again, but he should not have struck her. Worse, he should not have enjoyed it, finding in the blows to the little rebel face a release of countless frustrations. Worse, though, he had promised to let her go—a calculated lie. The threat of loss, the chance to fail, these he needed as whole men need love and hope, and now that Belle incarnated them—how could he let her go? But he would make it up to her. He would give in return. Ultimately, a woman needed only one thing from a man, and in this respect he was not only endowed but practised. Belle was basically earthy, in spite of the harp she wore on her sleeve, and he felt sure he could charm her out of her crush on that Boston beanpole. The trouble was, Belle was not quite yet a woman. Before he approached her again as lover, he must reinstate himself as father, and he cast about in his mind for a speedy paternal gesture. He did not have to cast far.

He was on his knees in the anteroom, wiping the spilled

money piece by piece on the kerchief that had gagged him, when Benancia spoke from the doorway.

"You are up early, your grace. May I serve you breakfast?" She noticed the blood, and she crossed herself slowly, her eyes bugged. "Señor Talent, nombre de Dios, what do you do?"

His knee cracked as he straightened. "Funerals cost money," he said, "and this one's got to be gorgeous."

CHAPTER XV

THE CORTEGE PULLED away from the cathedral amid a clangour of iron tongues. There were eight horse-drawn carriages, the total in Panama available for hire: a victoria, a buckboard, and six black broughams, the painted company names (and rates) on their sides obscured by draped hammer-cloths.

Behind the last brougham which overflowed like a tin of muffins with De Begas, Manuel, erect and proud, rode a black Arabian stallion. He wore with the absolute conviction of the pretender the colonial caballero garb—black sombrero, black bolero encrusted with silver embroidery, one of Lucius' best white frilled shirts, and tight-fitting trousers flared and slitted at the bottom to accommodate the spur wheels. Next came Ramon on Lucius' dappled grey, and Nicasia on Belle's palfrey. There followed a straggling cavalry astride the stunted local breed of burros, the men in white cotton and straw hats but shoeless, the women shawled lumps of black. Bringing up the rear was the inevitable band of procession-followers whose numbers increased at every twist of the street—old women, naked children, cripples and beggars, dogs and goats, a few pigs and a turkey.

As the dissonances of the bells faded out, the retinue set up a lively cacophony of its own. The dogs barked, the goats bleated, the donkeys hee-hawed, and the mourners shouted back and forth to each other and to those who sat before their roadside hovels, grinding corn or rubbing clothes on a stone.

"Some big funeral, eh, señoras?"

"Look, hombre, how the old one at my side snores while the donkey walks. Much wine last night, eh, viejo?"

"His daughter believes he drinks nothing at night because he has such a big thirst in the morning!"

"There is Catalina, the thin one. Who gave her a candle for this funeral?"

A friar in corded brown habit, poll protected from the sun by brown hood, shambled down the road, staff in hand.

"Buenos días, Padre."

"Buenos días, amigos." The Franciscan stretched out a grimy hand. "Money for prayers for the one who has passed on?"

They stared open-mouthed as if a hand were a strange object. They twisted around on their mounts to stare. To be begged from, *ai-ee*, that was something, no? The brown back plodded on. The laughter and the teasing began again.

"The head of Manuel's mother will soon grow too big to carry. Today it is big like a bucket."

"And your head, amarga, would it not swell if your son rode a horse instead of always the belly of his wife?"

"Listen to that one. When she dies, they will need two coffins—one for her, one for her tongue."

The foliage thickened. Slanting palms. A mango tree large as a church. Pineapples growing wild in the matted earth. Banana clumps, leaves beaten to rags by the winds. A ruined fountain. A wayside shrine, its base grey with melted candle wax, its cross bone white against the azure sky.

At the landgate in sight of the ruined belfry whose stone pate fuzzed with grass shoots, most of the pedestrians quit the parade. They had spent a pleasant hour collecting gossip, now they would return home to spread it. But some who had known the deceased or who knew the bereaved family or who were simply too curious to forego the spectacle of burial, scrambled across the moat and, *ran* after the joggling vehicles to hitch a ride. Not, of course, on the first one, the victoria. That was the one that drew the hearse. Also, it was driven by

the gambler, owner of the Casa del Tigre Real, the rich Americano who was paying for the funeral. Also, it transported the priest and the American missionary, Señor Goodberry. The second carriage, the buckboard, was driven by El Gigante, a newly arrived Americano, not rich, who printed news sheets for his countrymen. With him, very rich, in black gown, black bonnet, black mitts, black ruffled parasol, was La Tigrita who, it was said, was possessed of a temper as fierce as the beast for which she was called. No one was foolish enough to jump that carriage. But they clambered cheerfully aboard the others, and even though the mother and the aunts of Manuel tried to beat them off with umbrellas, they hung on. They rode the fenders, the axletrees, sat cross-legged on the bonnets. After all, who were the De Begas but vendors and servants, pelados like themselves? As for Tío Carlos, the dead one, had he not mingled with the lowest of the low—the leprous, the aged, the unwanted—a scab on the face of the city wall? Now he lay in state in a carven hearse attended by eight carriages, and his carcass was being carried not to the city boneyard but to a far and private place, where a few years ago he had dug holes for the choleraic bodies of his wife and children, promising that one day he would lie beside them. This day the promise would be fulfilled. To die was nothing, but to die with honour, ah, that was the desire of the heart, and if it happened to Tío Carlos, it could happen to them. Here was proof that God's miracles were without limit.

Following Manuel's directive, the procession filed off the Old Panama Road to an inland trail that deteriorated to mere wheel ruts and then disappeared in salt flat—a low plateau once inundated by a backwash of gulf inlet and ever since too alkaline to nurture grass. There had been no rain, and the ground was parched by the sun, its surface soft powder. The cortege rolled across it in clouds of dust, and the heat on the plain was intense.

Sticky and disgruntled, Belle sat in her silks, trying to show an interest in Jim's business. Since that glorious night on the

beach they had been together very little, alone not at all. On Friday he had worked on his paper, on Saturday he had been busy selling it, on Sunday getting advertisements and subscriptions for it, and now, at last, when he might have been telling her certain things she longed to hear, what was he talking about but the blasted paper.

"Just think of it, Belle, the first American newspaper in Panama! A dubious honour since Panama has been called the pesthole of the world, but history of a sort. Jiminy, the men ate it up. I could have sold another five hundred copies, if I'd had them—and next time I will. Even the Panameños bought it and several of them have sent in their orders for subscriptions. Why, I've got enough orders for advertisements to keep me for a month. Listen to this one." He pulled some papers out of his trousers, began to read: "'American Hotel. Owned by Mr. Jansen, an American citizen, and kept in the real American style. Neat rooms, clean bedding, excellent table. The favourite of California emigrants and others.' How's that?"

"Emigrants and others. Who would the others be?"

"Oh, well, Jansen wants that in. Businessmen get notions about what they want said and it doesn't pay to argue. Now, wait, there are more." He handed the reins to Belle, drew more papers out of his pocket. "Here is an order from El Dorado Fruit and Liquor Store, Lopez and Avila, props. And here's one from R. Leech and Company, mule transporters. But the advertising's only part of it. There's the news. For instance, I'll be writing up this funeral. And there's the editorial side——"

"Tatteration!" Belle cursed, spitting dust. She could have cried. He wasn't even trying to hold her hand. And the hoop she was wearing was as good as a stone wall between them. Still, it had been wear the hoop or ride with Lucius. "But, Lucius, there's not room for both my hoop and the priest's fat behind. And it would never do to put the priest in the second buggy; that'd be a slap in the gob." And Lucius, who lately wouldn't let butter melt in his mouth, had had to agree. He

was clearly ashamed of himself and well he might be—black-mailing a girl and then slapping her silly. Ah, God, the trap she was in! Well, never mind that. Here she was where she wanted to be, trussed up like a roasting pig, all she needed was an apple in her mouth, heaven knew the temperature was right—and Jim talked to her of advertisements.

"I've been turning over the next editorial in my mind," Jim went on, eyes squinted to the bleached desert. "Would you like to hear about it?"

"Oh, my," she sighed, "why not?"

But he missed the sarcasm. "I've decided to discuss the problem of American courtesy. Our men have been treating the natives with contumely, ignoring their customs and their feelings. If we don't curb this rudeness, hatred will build up, there might be race riots. There are more serious problems, of course. There's the banditry, the speculation in ship tickets, crooked gambling, but it's a little early in the game for hard-hitting——"

"Gambling!" she echoed, slow to understand. "You wouldn't write against gambling! Why, that'd be against me!"

"Well, now, Belle, you mustn't take it personally. I'll admit I had considered an article on the pitfalls of gambling, but then I—uh—I kind of postponed that. But in case of foul play, I can't let personal interest sway me. The House of the Royal Tiger is honest, I'm sure, but Monte Mike's isn't. My informers tell me——"

"*Informers!* You have spies out, do you?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. But folks know that as a newspaperman I'm interested in the public welfare. They give me tips. Healy, the fellow who owns my lodging place, told me the roulette wheel at Monte Mike's is magnetized. When I get the time, I intend to go there and see for myself. Once I'm convinced, it's my duty to speak out——"

Belle's coughing fit assumed alarming proportions.

"Pull up, Belle, it's their dust."

They drew abreast of the lead hack.

"She's been eating your dust," Jim explained.

Lucius grinned. "No joy ride, is it?"

"Better now?" Jim asked, patting her back.

She wiped her streaming eyes. How could she tell him that she didn't care if she choked to death on the spot? You can't fight destiny, Lucius had said, and maybe he was right. The pain and the strain were too much. Informers! Ah, God, it was surely just a matter of time. Better to give him up now than to destroy him later. Hello, love; goodbye . . .

"They're all catching on," Lucius called, nodding left and right.

Following Rideout's example, the entourage had fanned out in a horizontal line, elongated at either end by the horseback- and mule-riders.

The parallel arrangement proved too much for Lucius Talent's suggestible mind. It had been a long time between races.

"Tallyho!" he cried, leaping from his seat. He reached over and thwacked the pair of horses that drew Belle and Rideout. The buckboard shot forward. He whipped his four-horse team and they sprang to life. Behind, the hearse rolled and bucked on the tortured cart.

"Tallyho!" Lucius cried again, waving the rest on.

Belle's silk-gloved hands could keep no purchase on the reins.

Jim took over, leaning back hard. "What's up?" he yelled, bewildered. "Has he gone mad?"

Their horses reared, fighting the bit.

Suddenly all the frustration and conflict that had been boiling in Belle flipped the lid of control. Racing to a funeral, that would do it, show Jim what she was, for good and aye, and be done with him. She stripped off her gloves, snatched the whip out of its socket, began to flay the horses.

"After him, you moiley cows! Get up, get up! Give him a run for his money!"

"*Belle!*" roared Jim, shocked to the bone. "This is a funeral!"

"In your eye. Let 'er rip!"

She fought him for the reins and when she couldn't wrest them away, she slashed at the steaming rumps. Jim could only guide, dared not stay the horses for fear of cutting their mouths. The flimsy calash rattled over the declivities in the terrain, its aged springs as noisy as water on a tin roof.

The other six carriages tottered crazily after the two racers, and the end riders spurred their mounts. They had no idea why the gambler had ordered the burst of speed, but they were accustomed to obeying their superiors without question. He had waved them on, and on they came, filling the bright silence with the thunder of wheels and hoofs, and the shrill cries of women, and the groans of the hangers-on.

"Pick up your feet, you blasted turtles!" screamed Belle. The hot wind wrapped her face like a muffler, grit powdered her lashes, caked her lips. She felt nothing, neither heat nor wind nor dust. She had forgotten Jim, who had all he could do to divert the belaboured team from the worst of the fissures and the huge hard-baked clods that lay about like rocks. She had in fact forgotten herself. She was conscious only of the need to outstrip the monster that breathed smoke at her side.

Lucius had the handicap of extra weight but he also had twice the horsepower and a reckless love for the sport of kings. Belle's whip cut stinging figure eights in an attempt to keep his pace. Her bonnet bobbed on its strings, and from her rapt and rosy face fell a stream of imprecations. "Go it, go it, my sweeties! Faster, faster, or I'll beat the bejusus off your hide!"

A green-fringed ridge appeared, marking the end of the flat. A fence of irregular dried sticks topped the rise. The natives slowed their carriages, but Belle and Lucius continued to try to break the tie. Their whips whistled and cracked. The buckboard pulled a neck ahead. There remained however only a hundred yards or so in which to hold a lead. Belle flung the whip to the fleeing earth, and with both hands, she jerked the reins just below Jim's grasp. The horses swerved to the right, cutting in front of the victoria.

"We've won!" Belle claimed.

"Look out!" Lucius yelled, reining in.

His horses piled up against each other, barged into the rear right wheel of the buckboard, toppling it just short of the embankment. Jim was catapulted to the ground and Belle on top of him, cushioned by his body, her hoop an open umbrella behind her.

"Jim, Jim, are you hurt?"

Jim flung her off him as one would shoo a cloud of gnats. He stood up, flexed his arms, dusted his long legs, picked up his hat and fitted it to his head with a single vicious jerk. His face was swart with blood, his eyes blind with black fire. He did not answer Belle, and he could not look at her.

Lucius swung Belle around, hugged her, laughing over her head into the sky. "Oh, what a madcap of a girl!" He rocked with her, laughing, but his laughter had a wicked sound to it and her heart was sinking fast. Not only was the triumph of victory leaking out of her but remorse was sluicing in.

The natives pressed in a close circle about them.

"Pues, qué anda? Qué habida? Qué paso? Señor? Padre?"

The portly priest replied by lifting his open palms, his eyes rolling heavenward.

"Tenga la bondad de decirnos," Manuel insisted. "What was the danger, your grace?"

The Americans looked at each other. Talent twinkled. Ride-out glowered. Belle wilted. Goodberry's moon face was impassive as always, but he said, *sotto voce*, "You better give them a reason, Talent, and you better make it good."

"Las aranas," Talent fabricated carelessly. "Tarantula holes. Many, many of them. A whole colony of tarantulas. I feared they would bite the horses' legs. And once the animals got going there was no stopping them."

"Ah, si. Ahora ya se ve," they said, nodding politely, their faces grave with disbelief—because one did not stop horses with whips. "The spiders, of course," they said to each other, "what else?" The men wiped their foreheads with their wrists,

the women pressed their upper lips with the ends of their shawls. Americanos, locos, even the rich ones, who could know what went on in their heads?

Manuel signalled to lift the coffin from the cart. Several men sprang to his assistance. With it, they threaded past the painted wooden crosses, some of which were garlanded with dusty paper flowers. In the far corner of the impromptu cemetery, a medium-sized mound and two shorter ones were outlined by pebbles. Close by was a dark slash in the pale earth which Lucius, with executive foresight, had ordered dug the day before. Into the gape, the perspiring pall-bearers lowered their burden. The women, weeping softly, their grief not for the dead but for the mortality of the living, lined up on one side of the new grave, the men on the other.

"His bones rest quietly beside those of his wife and his children," said the padre. "This was the wish of his heart." He threw a handful of soil on to the casket. "En el nombre del Padre, y del Hijo, del Espiritu——"

Belle's eyes sought Rideout. He stood, tree-tall, among the native men, his hat to his breast. His eyes were not on the casket, nor on the chanting priest, but on the horizon across the plain, his profile calm, rugged as hewn rock, against the calm blue sky. Only the mottling of his cheek confessed his choler. Her glance found Lucius. Two tips of fence-sticks protruded above his head, pointing each ear. He grinned at Belle, and winked. Belle frowned severely, cast her eyes down. On the coffin lid the afterimages appeared: the stern visionary profile and the irreverent Pan-eared wink. The Lord could speak no plainer. Furthermore, it was not His first sign. For if He had not wanted her to have Jim, would He have heeded her prayers to keep him safe from the robbers? Even Jim had had to laugh at the uncanniness of the accident. "I was hot on their trail," Jim had told her, "when my horse slipped a shoe. And where do you think the horseshoe fell? Right under Healy's new sign. It's tacked to a tree to point the way to the Coconut Grove Hotel!" And, come to think of it, if a girl

were collecting signs, there was this: the church bells had tolled twelve when he'd ridden her home on his horse from the beach and they'd tolled twelve again the night he'd ridden her to the beach from the café. The devil could do a deal of tricks, but power to ring church bells, he had not.

"Amen," intoned the priest.

"Amen," sang the mourners.

"Amen," said Belle fervently.

The pall-bearers jumped into the grave, stamped the coffin down. There were joshing comments from the sidelines as they walked the coffin lid. The women helped slide the piled soil back into the pit, and then they tamped the covered mound with their bare feet. Afterwards, a jug of aguardiente was passed around. Of the Americans, only Rideout accepted his turn at the jug. His Adam's apple bobbed valiantly, his eyes watered, as he forced the swallow. The jug went from mouth to mouth until it was empty. The mourners returned to the carriages, their badinage gay as flags in the air.

"You see," Lucius remarked defensively, "death means no more to these people than a cold in the head."

"Seems so, don't it, to hear them banter," Belle said, looking hopefully at Rideout.

Jim Rideout stared stonily ahead. Insensitive, crude, self-centred, wild, he was thinking. And he had been dreaming of marriage!

"Everyone has his own way of facing death," Goodberry averred.

Jim walked up to the young men who were conversing with Manuel. "Will one of you be good enough to lend me a mount?"

"Con mucho gusto, señor," Ramon spoke up. "I will ride home with Nicasia."

Nicasia bent her head to hide her smile.

"Many thanks. I'll return it by sundown." Jim turned toward Belle, addressed the portion of sky just above her bonnet. "Let's call off our engagement for this evening, shall we? I

really don't think we have anything more to say to each other." He bowed briefly to the priest and to the missionary, swung up on the grey, and cantered off into the chalky flat.

Belle looked after his dust, chewing her lips.

Lucius put his arm around her. "Portrait of a young man on a high horse," he said mockingly.

Belle shrugged his arm off.

"Please to take my horse, patróna," Manuel said at her elbow.

She gave Manuel a tearful look. "Your new black horse?"

"I will ride your horse with Ramon," Manuel said. "Nicasia can ride in the carriage with the aunts as is right and proper."

Belle saw Nicasia's smile fall, and she hesitated.

"Make haste, Tigrita," Manuel urged, "for I think El Gigante has now the black heart and I know well how this feels."

That decided her. Poor dear, how could Nicasia make Manuel suffer? He was worth ten Ramons. Besides, they were all children, if they had her troubles—— She let Manuel assist her with the stirrups, and she galloped off.

About half a mile before the landgate, Rideout turned left, and Belle, reaching that point a few minutes after, saw the sign on the tree: TO THE COCONUT GROVE HOTEL. The sign provoked another freshet of tears as she followed the finger of God.

The trail through the thicket was at times no wider than a cat. It wound through mixed forest so high and thick that the sky was not always visible. Cocobolos and cedars rose a hundred feet in the air, their trunks studded with air plants. It was not until she was convinced she was lost and ready to turn back that she saw the clearing and the little wooden building, a two-story orange crate, with hammocks strung nearby. There were two men in sight but neither was Jim Rideout. She rode in.

"Howdy, ma'am. You looking to rent lodgings?" The man's beard was braided into three neat tails.

"Lodgings, nothing!" This one had a snake's rattle in his hatband, and he spat a brown stream. "Ain't you the little lady known as Tiger Belle?"

Belle dabbed at her tear-stained cheeks. "I am, though it's a wonder you can recognize it with all this grit on my face. I've been riding for some time. I think I got lost."

"We're tucked away, all right. I'm Ezard Healy, ma'am. Been at the Tiger many times. This here's my partner, Ray Smith. He don't go sportin' which is why he didn't place you right off. Is there something we can do for you?"

"I've come to pay a call on Mr. Rideout. Have you seen him about?"

"Jim just come in. Not more'n ten minutes ago. Ray, you go call him, will you? I'll tie up the little lady's horse."

She sat her mount while Healy led it by the bridle to the hitching-post. The rattle sounded in his hat as he stepped. A guffawing broke out behind them. Healy turned. Belle looked back over her shoulder.

Jim Rideout and the pigtail-bearded Smith stood in front of the "hotel," doubled up with laughter. They wheezed and they bellowed. They smashed their fists against the post. They dropped their wobbling heads and slapped their legs. Every time they looked up, they went off into another spasm.

"What in thunderation?" Belle scowled over her shoulder.

Smith beckoned weakly to Healy, who frowned and shook his rattle. But curiosity won out. Healy dropped the reins, walked to the men. Belle, who knew instinctively that they were laughing at her, was unable to budge, glancing now over her shoulder, now looking forward haughtily, growing hotter and hotter until she could feel the sweat trickling down the inner sides of her legs.

Now Healy began to laugh, slowly at first, then more loudly, then helplessly, hysterically, until he threw himself down and rolled in the grass like a horse that has been unsaddled.

"Bloody clowns," she said under her breath. She forced herself to dismount. She tied her horse to the bar. Then she

stalked stiffly toward the men who, quieting at last, were wiping their eyes and blowing their noses.

Her chin pointed to Rideout. "And what may I ask has turned grown men into a pack of howling hyenas?"

Smith and Healy, embarrassed, slunk away, not without a little snort every step or two.

"It's clear you were laughing at me."

"Your pardon, Belle—I'm sorry but——"

"But me no buts, sir. What struck you so blinking funny?"

"It was nothing, Belle, really." He took her elbow, led her into the hotel. A cannonade of laughter went off in the distance.

A speckled hen hurried out as they walked in. The "lobby" was hot, messy, dusty—a chaos of papers, crates, broken chairs and, smack in the centre, the famous printing press.

Belle kicked over a milking stool. "Tell me!"

"I can't. Forgive me, Belle, forget the whole rude thing, but don't ask me——"

"What did I do?"

"Nothing. It wasn't anything you did."

"But the joke was on me."

"Well"—he grimaced, fighting the risible memory—"half."

"And the other half?"

His lips pursed, his fists clenched for control.

"My horse?"

He nodded, eyes dancing.

Her breast heaved. "A dirty thing he did while I was on him?"

"No, word of honour, nothing like that."

She grabbed him by the arms to shake him, but it was like trying to shake the trunk of an oak.

"Tell me, or I'll hold my breath till I die of suffocation and you'll be the murderer as sure as you're standing on two feet!"

She took a deep breath, clamped her lips. Her eyes popped.

He melted with tenderness. "Stop, Belle, don't be a goose." He swung her up on to a table. "It's not worth getting this

worked up about—honestly. I'll tell you. I'll try to tell you. It's hard to describe. You won't get mad, will you?"

"No madder than I am now."

He tried to explain the picture she presented from the rear. The bonnet, the lace-shawed shoulders, the tiny waist—and then the enormous hoop skirt which covered the rump of the horse whose stance was such that only one pair of legs showed --and these under the hoop, seeming to belong to her.

He shook his head, smiling in spite of his earnest desire to soothe her. "I could draw it, but I can't explain it."

"Never mind, it's clear enough, I'll not be needing a diagram as well," she snapped, not only not amused but still furious. "I'm only sorry you didn't split your blasted sides. And to think I came here to apologize. To beg your forgiveness." She jumped off the table, turned her back to him, flung up her skirts, and began to struggle with the tapes of the hoop at the back of her waist, muttering the while. "At least I knew what I was doing. I was getting you mad on purpose so's you'd never want to have anything to do with me again. But you, you great boobie, you just—here, get me out of this mortification."

He lifted her out of the steel frame. Her skirts dropped into place. He turned her around to him slowly, drew her close, bent his face low to meet hers. He kissed her first on each temple and then with infinite care and sweetness on her pouting mouth.

After a moment she tilted her head away from his kiss, laid her ear under his heart. "I'm that sorry I offended, Jim. Believe me, I'm ashamed of the entire shenanigan. I only did it to rile you. I wanted to make you think I was a cold-hearted sinner so you'd leave me be. And then, before I knew it, I got all wrapped up in the race itself. That's the way I am, Jim. Fighting off the fires of hell one minute and warming my hands at them the next."

"Oh, it wasn't as bad as all that. Maybe I got too hot under the collar. I must admit the natives seemed no more than puzzled. But I happen to take the Golden Rule rather seriously. Maybe I'm priggish, but you have to take me the way I

am, just as I take you. The truth is, I suppose I was jealous. You were heeding Lucius' bidding and you ignored mine. I suppose that's what made me burn."

She put her arms around his waist, touched by his admission of weakness. "Ah, Jim, you're a wonderful man. I don't want to lose you. And I keep fearing I will. Never since the day I was born did I feel so dear and so safe as I do in your arms. And I'm so afraid you'll take them away. I've been frightened since the day we met."

He stroked her head. "You're talking wildly, Belle, honey. How can you feel safe and frightened at the same time?"

"Easy. It's your loving me that makes me feel safe and it's my loving you that frights me."

"Why?"

"Because we're not the same kind of people, you and I. You're good and I'm bad."

"Don't keep saying that, you're no such thing. It's your environment that's bad—not you. I'm going to get you out of there. A gambling house is no place for a girl. As soon as I make enough money, I'm going to take you away. We'll start a new life in the West." Suddenly his knees turned to water, taking the heat out of his loins. "As man and wife," he got out. But when he tipped her face up, he saw not the glory of shared pledge but anxiety still. The name, Lucius Talent, hung between them, pregnant as the odour of thunderstorm. "Belle, if there's something you have to tell me, tell me now. Now, I'll understand. Later, I might not."

Her arms tightened around him. "No, no, there's nothing to tell, nothing to keep us apart. So kiss me, my darling, kiss me and hold me and tell me how it'll be in the West."

The room darkened as they kissed, and a wind blew.

Outside in the clearing a few drops of rain fell—pit-pot-pit, and then a steady pattering—the first rain in three weeks.

The cathedral bells slashed a single rent in the rainy dark. Belle's slippers scarcely touched ground as she sped across the

courtyard and up the flight of stairs to her bedroom. She lit a candle and the room woke softly, touched her cheeks and her damp shoulders with fingers of shadow. She, in love with touch, having just come from Jim's good-night embrace, touched back. She ran her hand over the fan-backed chair, petted the llama rug, felt the firm petals of the magnolia blossom in the bowl, stroked the face of the painted madonna in the niche, redrew the white iron scrolls of the bedstead, palmed the pristine flatness of the bed. And then she whirled up as if to music, and looked at herself in the mirror. She lit another candle and she gazed and gazed at the reflection which pleased her so much, her heart swelled. Beautiful. Jim had said it and she was, she was, she could see it at last. She unpinned her hair, grown out now to her shoulders, and she fluffed it and patted it and smoothed it until it made a glossy black frame for the face that Jim had chosen above all others.

She pulled off her clothes, kicked them into a corner, and began to rummage through her linens for the nightdress, the one she'd been saving because the linen was so fine and the lace ruffles so painstakingly applied, she hadn't been able to bring herself to wear it. She slipped it over her head and then spent some minutes on her hair again before she permitted herself to step back from the mirror. But she couldn't see the bottom of the skirt, so she put a chair against the far wall and stood on it. But she was lost in the shadows. She got down and lit the candles in the wall sconces, climbed the chair again. There. This was the way she would appear before him on their wedding night. Mrs. Jeremiah Rideout. Mr. Rideout's beautiful wife. She jumped down and kissed the mouth in the cool glass. Mrs. Jim Rideout, Mrs. Rideout, she named herself aloud, rejoicing that Nicasia was gone, spending the funeral night with her relatives, the De Begas. Poor things, there they sat in black, mourning death, while she in bridal white—— Well, that was the way of the world, a world she'd had no hand in the making, and not one dark thought should spoil this night for her. Not one. If a fear came or a doubt, she'd

puff it away like a dandelion head. She might not go to sleep at all. She might just stay up and dream.

There were not many things one could hide from a room-mate, particularly a room-mate who cleaned one's drawers, but there was a thing Belle was a little ashamed of, considering it childish, and this she sought now in the closet on the top shelf in a hatbox under the crown of a plumed hat. Ah, there it was—the dear bag that held her second button collection.

She flung herself on the bed and began to set the buttons out, one by one, going over in her mind as she did so the events of the fabulous day. The race and the shame of being laughed at and the absolution of Jim's kisses. The ride through the dripping forest to La Mariposa. It wasn't till they sat across from each other at their same table with the candle lit between them that she began to believe that they might one day marry.

"But I'll be lonesome for you daytimes, Jimmy. I wish I could help you in the office. But then, how could I? Duncce that I am, I can hardly read, let alone write."

"Writing's no trick. I'll teach you on the ship. But you won't have to help me at the office. You'll be bossing servants in a brand-new brick mansion overlooking the bay of Yerba Buena. Well, not right away, maybe. Let's say a cottage first. With a cricket on the hearth and our slippers side by side on the fender. Oh, there'll be plenty of work for you to do. You'll be baking beans and making curtains and sipping tea of an afternoon with the other good wives. Before long, I hope you'll also be rocking cradles."

"Ah, it has a lovely sound to it, it has, it has. To think of me with a house and a husband all my own. But, oh dear, where'll I learn to do all those womanly things? All I can cook is pigs' knuckles and I've never sewed a stitch. I'm sure I'd do well with the dear little babies—that comes natural to a woman—but the other things like pouring tea and prattling with the neighbour-ladies, I don't know. Nicasia's the only girl I ever had any great shakes for talking with. And the subjects we pick for talking are hardly the thing for the parlour, I promise you."

He laughed, squeezed her hand. "I'll wager not. What do you talk about?"

"Oh, a deal of things."

"For instance."

"Oh, for instance—you."

"Me?" he crowed, surprised as a cock by the rising sun.

"It was the day after I fainted at the beach. I described the whole thing to her from beginning to end. The way you kissed my hand and the way you could hardly leave me go—oh, I'm a rare liar——"

He threw back his head, laughing. "You ran away from me—you wouldn't even look at me——"

"I took a peep at you when you thought I was still fainted."

"Why, a little——!"

So old the week-old past, so old they could laugh at themselves in it. Time was for mortals, not for lovers. And lovers was only the half of it—wait till she told Nicasia the latest. Mrs. Jeremiah Riecut . . . Maybe she'd give Nicasia her buttons. It didn't do for an engaged girl to have playthings. And she was truly engaged. They had gone from La Mariposa to the Tiger where, in spite of her plea for time, Jim had forthwith broken the news to Lucius. And then hadn't she felt the shilly-shallying fool, for what did Lucius do but give them a public wetting-down with champagne, the best imported, jero-boam after jero-boam of the stuff, for the rain had driven in a record crowd. He could be a barking dog, that Lucius, but he could turn prince in the pinches, and when he was being princely, he was to the manner born.

"Belle?"

She started violently—the buttons rolling—at the live sound.

"Belle, I saw your lights. May I come in?"

"No, go away, dear man, I'm undressed. I was just going to blow them out."

"Please, Belle, I must see you."

"Lucius, I've had the longest day of my life—can't it wait till the morrow?"

The knob turned and the door swung and Lucius stood on the threshold in a dressing gown with rain in his hair.

"Oh, Lord, didn't I lock it? Come in then and be done with it."

"Well, I'll be a son of a gun—my gold vest button!" He retrieved it from the floor, tossed it on to the bed with the others. "And the brass one with the wheel—that's Captain Hartstein's. My God, where did you get this one of silver? Only De Soto wears silver buttons like that."

"It's not the man who wears them, it's the buttons themselves that attract me," Belle said loftily.

Lucius laughed. His eye fell on the soiled white satin pouch. "My cravat! I've had Manuel turn my bureau drawers upside down for it."

"Did you? H'm. I wondered where it came from. I asked Nicasia to look up a piece of silk to sew a bag with. I thought to keep some beads in it. Maybe you left it around somewheres and she thought it was a rag."

"Never mind. You're welcome to it. In the idiom of Panama, my cravat is your cravat."

"Thank you indeed."

His smile was lopsided, the champagne no doubt, and she busied herself somewhat nervously with dropping the buttons back into the pouch. "And while I'm about thanking, I can't tell you enough how I appreciated the celebration tonight. No true uncle could have given a kinder blessing to his kin."

He took the pouch from her, pulled the ribbons with a snap, threw it on to the dresser where it settled with little teethlike clicks. "I can think of better ways of thanking. If you're really grateful, how about a kiss for Unc?"

"Now, Lucius, none of your cush. What did you need to see me for in the dead of the night?"

He reached out quickly and his withy arms held her fast. "I can't give you up, Belle. I tried—I wanted to be decent, but I can't sleep for wanting you. Oh, Belle, my little one, don't

leave me. You're so exciting, so desirable. Give me a little of your love, spare me one night——"

She strained back, stiff as a wagon tongue, half chiding, disbelieving.

"You're tiddly with spirits, man. I'm an engaged girl——"

"One night of love, only one, Belle——"

"You're mad, Lucius. You wouldn't hurt me——"

"No one will ever know——"

Uncle right enough, the same as that sewer, Paddy, sewers the both of them. "I'd sooner die—leave me go, you——!" Her knee came up—he locked it between his. Her head tried to butt—his chin glanced it aside. Oh, where are you, Aunt Kate, Nicasia, help, somebody help——!

"Don't fight me, little one——"

She fought him until he pinned her arms behind her, and with one hand in the small of her back skewered her to him. His other arm banded her shoulders. She did what there was left to do—jerked her head, wrenched her torso, kicked at the sides of his legs, but her feet were bare and the more she moved against him, the more animal madness he gained. His breath was live steam in the linnen valley between her breasts and the hair of his head stifled her loose gasping mouth. He toppled her to the bed—a snorting beast with a three-eyed grin—and for an instant she got new force from the kind of terror a child has of being eaten alive. The cords stood out in her neck as she made one convulsive effort to hurl him off. The effect was no more than a shudder. Then she gave up, and the last ounce of her sap leaked out from under her eyelids, and her head felt as if her hair had turned white.

He was whispering kisses, trying to breathe life into her. *Go on, get it over with*, she thought dully, and she waited, limp as wet paper, for the violation. It never came. After a moment or two the whispers and the kisses ceased, he seemed to be listening, not to her but to himself, and then he left her, but not before she had felt his manhood ebb as mysteriously, as finally as had her strength.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GOLD RUSH settled down to a sustained *furore*. In Panama the floating population encamped along the perimeter of the city, their night fires reminiscent of foreign legions poised for invasion. They slept in the plazas of the cathedral and of Santa Ana, and by day they thronged the narrow streets, restless, rampant as young lions. The Bay of Panama was studded with barks and schooners and sailing ships, but no matter how many vessels departed, there were always a thousand men left on the beach.

As the tide of emigration grew, so did the American cemetery. Dysentery and fever were constantly epidemic among the unacclimatized newcomers. There were no hospital facilities to speak of; treatment consisted of layman remedies, some highly whimsical, such as flannel bellybands, wine diets, and emetics, and the mortality rate was inestimable. "Only eight known deaths last week," announced the *Panama Bugle* in early March. "Let us hope that the burning of the savanna grass and the fresh northerly winds have cleaned out the sources of fever." But the catch in the *Bugle's* report was the word "known." Even the crosses on Cemetery Hill attested to only a portion of the fatalities, for as many bodies were dumped over the batteries into the sea as buried under sod.

The *ambiance* of death increased the rage to live. The former ecclesiastical atmosphere of the city went down in the welter of cockfights, wrestling bouts, street brawls, gambling, drinking, shooting. Indeed, the sound of gunfire became as common as the sound of church bells, with the Argonauts

using buzzards for target practice, although the natives were subject to fine for the killing of these natural scavengers. The taverns were frequented from noon till night, and the men stood four-deep at the gaming tables of poker, monte, roulette, rouge et noir, chuck-a-luck, blackjack, trente et quarante, casino, and dice.

The Tiger's door opened now at six instead of eight, but that was its only concession to competition. Let the other houses have the round-the-clock boozers. The Tiger was far and away the favourite haunt, a stock exchange as well as a casino, its bulletin boards posted daily with notices of arrivals and departures, and "personals" of all kinds—a room to be vacated, a man to be located, a memento lost, a letter hand-carried, a threat of revenge, a warning against a bad sea captain or a local swindler. Here at the Tiger, for fifty or a hundred dollars over the going price, you could buy passage on a ship that had been officially pronounced full up. You could raise money by auctioning off your farm in the States or buy the effects of the recently deceased. For two or three dollars you could engage the services of a succulent mestiza and for a little more you could treat yourself to a chicken dinner. If you were broke you could order a drink from Ramon, who wore a pet monkey on his shoulder, and you could dawdle over it as long as you pleased, feasting your eyes on the oil painting of a life-sized odalisque that hung above the mirrored bar. If you had money to burn, there was the faro table, and if you had time to kill, there was the midnight show—an orchestra of five pieces, a ten-girl dance-chorus of matched coffee hues, and of course, the pansy-faced Irish warbler who could make a man happy or hot or homesick or hell-bent just by the songs she sang and the way she sang them. Oh, it was easy to see why the gambler and the newspaper fellow had fallen head over heels in love with Tiger Belle. Night after night the two of them dogged her like a couple of hounds eyeing a bone, and if she dropped her handkerchief, they knocked heads stooping

for it, and a standing farewell gag was, "Write me and tell me who kills who—Rideout or Talent."

What gossip with its one-eyed vision didn't glean was that Tiger Belle was the most likely casualty of the triangle. The lilt had gone from her laughter, shadows ringed her eyes, and if the men sensed the emotionality of her singing, it was because only on stage did she dare to release her pent-up tensions.

Lucius had not accosted her again. He had apologized the next day for what he cavalierly termed "his alcoholic misadventure." "Most unfortunate, little one. Didn't mean to spoil the night of your betrothal—but then wine is no respecter of occasions, more's the pity since it goes to so many of them, eh?"—and he had not laid a hand on her since. In fact, she occasionally noticed Señora del Soto's carriage parked in the square of an afternoon. Nevertheless, she had confided her fear of Lucius to Nicasia who had sworn not to spend another night away from her and to keep a watchful eye out at all times. Nicasia was a devoted friend now, even Ramon's attentions could not distract her from her pledged service. Still Belle was always uneasy, always guarded, walking on tiptoe through a maze of propitiation and lies. Lies to Jim so that he should not guess the depth of her bondage nor anger Lucius to showdown. Lies to Lucius, in the wild hope that if she did not cross him in small things he would not cross her in the large. No one knew better than she what a ruthless scoundrel he could be, but she also knew that he was capable of grand gestures. Bedevilled man, ruling by vanity, swinging unpredictably between self-interest and self-destruction, there was no outguessing him. And now that the three of them lived under the same roof, she felt in constant jeopardy, the Tiger indeed a house of cards.

Why had Lucius invited Jim to move to the Tiger? He had offered him two of the first-floor storerooms plus meals in exchange for a quarter-page advertisement in each issue of the *Bugle*. Why? He was frying some fish, but whether cod or haddock and who was to eat it, Belle couldn't figure out.

However, she had no reasonable grounds for dissuading Jim when he decided to accept the offer.

"I'll be closer to you," Jim said.

"At least you'll be fed," she said. "And it'll give us more time together."

But somehow it didn't work out that way. With the business growing daily, Lucius looked to Belle for more and more assistance. Leisure time was hard to come by, practically had to be stolen, and though she and Jim had planned many outings, few materialized. If she left orders with Benancia for two picnic lunches, she'd find a dance rehearsal scheduled for that afternoon. If she tied a fishing rod to her saddle, Lucius would appear in the courtyard as magically as a genie out of a bottle.

"It won't take but a few minutes, Belle, I won't keep you from your—ah—angling. There's something I must discuss with you—and I don't care to be overheard. We can talk in the anteroom."

Belle would dismount without demur, but she'd call to Nicasia to fetch her a clean handkerchief. "I'll be talking over business with Señor Talent, dearie. Kindly wait with it outside the *anteroom*!" And even as she went, she'd phrase her apologies to Jim who'd be less than pleased at having to cool his heels on the dock.

"It's the pilfering again, Belle," Lucius would tell her. "Last night's bar receipts are off, I just checked them. I think we're going to have to sack Ramon."

"Ah, no, Lucius, we can't do a thing like that. We've no proof at all, and the customers do so love Coco's monkey-shines. In your own words, a bit of showmanship makes all the difference between run-of-the-mill and razzle-dazzle. With Coco on his shoulder, Ramon is as cheering to the homesick men as a clown in a circus."

"You were ready to send them both packing yesterday when that fool monkey ran off with your bonnet. I never heard such a caterwauling."

"Well, as it turned out, no harm was done. Besides, it would break Nicasia's heart if we let Ramon go."

"He'll break it anyway. He's only playing with Nicasia. Why, there's not a skirt in the joint he hasn't been under."

"Whisht, Lucius! That's vulgar talk."

"Your pardon, ma'am. I forgot you were shortly to become a respectable San Francisco matron. But aren't you pulling in your horns a little soon?"

"There you go taunting me again. What's wrong with being respectable?" she demanded, her eyes filling with the too ready tears. "I can remember when you urged me to the very thing."

"That was before I knew you. Knowing you, I just don't see how you're going to stand being a little Alice-sit-by-the-fire. But that's as it may be. While you're here, let's check these musical selections for tonight, eh?"

So it went—the harassments and decisions of management plus the nightly performance at the gaming table and on stage. Belle fell on her bed in the small hours of each morning like a beached flounder, utterly exhausted.

"I'm worried about you, Belle," Jim fumed. "That bully has your nose in a ring. He works you till you're ready to drop. It isn't healthy to rest so little and work so hard in this fever-ridden climate. I'm worried about us too. It's plain to see there's method in Talent's madness."

"Now, darling, why must you always be picking on him? A blood relative couldn't be kinder to the two of us."

"He's killing us with his kindness. And you know why—he thinks he can break us up. He wants to keep you here with him. Trying to make you feel important, indispensable. He ran the Tiger without your advice before I came along, didn't he?"

"Sure, anyone with eyes in his head can see there's three times the business there was then."

"And three times as many hirelings to handle it. Oh, no, Belle, there's nothing the matter with my eyes. It's not the

business that's running you ragged—it's Lucius Talent. If he told you to jump over the battery, you'd run all the way to oblige."

"I wouldn't either."

"Oh, wouldn't you? What about yesterday? Just as we're being lightered out to the ferry, there's Manuel waving his arms on the beach, calling us back. And what for? A piano. Not life and death, but a piano. Just arrived. Absolutely imperative you pass on it for size and price and tone. Now, isn't that preposterous? The piano wasn't going to run away. Honestly, Belle, if you can't see through that kind of——"

"And what are you trying to prove? That my say-so means nothing? That I'm just a nobody around the Tiger? Then why would Lucius want to keep me here at all?"

"Because he's in love with you, the same as I am, God help us all!"

"Ah, Jimmy lad ——" and her eyes would fill again. "It's early to be putting thorns on the rose of our love. What're we argufying about—my mind's jumped the track of it altogether. Now, please, darling, let's be done with tormenting. As soon as Lucius finds another dealer, he'll forget I'm about. And if he doesn't, we'll go off anyway. Didn't Mr. Nelson say he'd try to get us aboard the *Niantic* and isn't it due in port in the middle of April? That's only a month away, love. We'll sneak out if we have to."

"And leave all your earnings behind? Would you do that?"

"I don't care a fig for the money any more. If we don't have the fare when the time comes, I'll sell the black pearl. I know a creature who's pining to buy it."

"Never mind your pearl. I know what it means to you. By the time the *Niantic* comes in, I'll have the fare for both of us. Once we get to California, good old Bess will keep us in groceries, have no doubt of that. I just hate to see you gypped, that's all."

"I'll not be gypped if I have you. Money's important to a girl alone in the world. Not to a good man's wife."

"Belle, Belle dearest!" He hugged her then, thinking proudly that his own sister might have spoken thus. "You're so good, so sweet, we'll never quarrel again. Not another cross word, I promise."

"And I."

But it was a promise neither could keep. The wounds that healed in twosome broke open in threesome. Galled as he was by Talent's transparency, Jim stuck as close to the man as the demands of his business would permit. There was another American weekly in Panama now—the *Panama Star*, and to keep his lead, Jim had begun to publish the *Bugle* twice a week. But even so, there were few minutes of Belle's day that he couldn't account for. If he couldn't have Belle to himself, neither should the wily gambler. Every night he took the place at her left at the faro table. Lucius, as case-keeper and teller, sat on her right. The two rivals jested pleasantly with one another, lit each other's pipes, brought each other chairs—the souls of courtesies.

"Can I get you a brandy, Lucius, old boy? You look kind of beat."

"Not me, I'm fit as a fiddle, thanks. But maybe Belle would like a punch or something. Thirsty, little one?"

Belle would look nervously from one to the other. Hate had sharpened their strengths. The fair man's features were pared to the bone, taut, foxlike. And the gentle lustrous Black-bird had become a darkly brooding hawk. "I don't think I care for a thing just now, but I will have my shawl, Jim darling."

Both men would pounce on the mantle that hung over the back of her chair.

"Watch out, lads—you'll tear it!" And, as the lace sighed around her shoulders, "All right, let's get on with the game, gents. Here's the five, an eight'll make the nine square."

Before long, Jim Rideout balked at standing jealous guard. It was not only boring, it was ignominious. And he was ashamed of badgering his beloved. He was becoming as sus-

picious, as ill-humoured, he told himself, as an old woman. To regain his identity, to bolster his confidence as a man, which at twenty needs bolstering from time to time, he naturally turned to a man's world—the world of action.

Of all the lawlessness rife on the isthmus, the most serious was the plundering of the mule trains, and the wholesale murdering it entailed. The cargo brought back from California by those who had struck it rich proved irresistible to the native brigands, and the native police made no attempt to cope with the situation. The New Granadan government permitted the gold to be dumped in front of the Custom House in Panama City and guarded by the local soldiery. Beyond that, they offered no protection, and it was on the trails to Cruces and Gorgona—twenty-five miles of unbroken forest—that protection was needed. The first homebound prospectors took their chances. Some were lucky and got through. Many did not. The gold they had travelled so far to unearth went to the hill men, and their bodies to the buzzards.

In an open letter to Washington, the *Bugle* urged that the United States demand the authority to provide its own police force. But the suggestion was premature. A certain New York Company, headed by the financier William Aspinwall, was at this moment negotiating for the franchise for a railroad across the isthmus. It would hardly have been strategic to acknowledge at this ticklish point in the proceedings the necessity for policing their friendly neighbours. And so the isthmus express agencies stepped in. They wrote to their home offices for munitions. When the shipments of Colt revolvers, bowie knives, buckshot guns, powder and ball arrived, they undertook for a fee to convoy the pack trains with detachments of armed guards.

At the end of March, a Pacific Mail side-wheeler out of San Francisco brought the largest cargo of gold to date—half a million dollars, not in the usual bags of dust and bars and nuggets, but in specie. The load was to be transhipped from Panama to Chagres and thence by eastern mail packet to

New York. Jim Rideout, whose campaign against land pirates had brought him into close contact with the agent, William Nelson, volunteered to ride along with the convoy as far as Cruces.

"I'd really like to hit the trail, Mr. Nelson," Jim said. "I've been writing on hearsay. Time I got an eyewitness report."

"We'd be glad to have you, Jim, but I'm frank to say we expect trouble. With boodle of this size, you can be sure the hill men are limbering up for the swoop. Think it over. Sleep on it. Can't tell," the older man added shrewdly, "life may look sweeter in the morning."

The pack train was loaded just before daybreak in front of the Custom House. There were thirty-nine mules in all. The first eight, tied head to tail, their gleaming cargo topped with coffee berries, were started off at first light, driven by two natives whose breechclouts were tight with pistols and machetes. The second and third groups followed at half-hour intervals. Jim Rideout and the crack muleteer, Juan, brought up the last seven hardy little mustangs who carried the bulk of the specie. The hope was that by deploying the train, the rear detachments could take warning from gunfire at the front and either by-pass the site of the raid if the terrain permitted, or retreat to Panama.

By the time Jim and his muleteer started, the streets of the town were already alive with produce carts, water carriers, emigrants, and churchgoers. It was the first day of Passion Week, and the air was full of sound—strident tower bells, clanking wheels, whistles and horns and belled cattle, and from the yawning dark-mouthed churches, the sonorous chanting of the penitents. The young girls wore white with red or yellow slippers and chains of coins that tinkled on their bosoms as they footed the worn church steps. Accompanying them, old women in black paused before the entrance to suck the lighted ends of their cigars and store the stumps in their black hair, while those departing stopped to light up again.

At the end of the string of mules, Jim sat his white horse,

his hand on his knee, nodding to an Argonaut he knew, returning the smile of a pretty girl. It was a fine day, bright and sunny, with an off-ocean breeze. Good fishing weather. Not that one had to wait for weather to fish these waters. The name "Panama" meant "abundance of fish," and it was no misnomer. Jim thought of the day he and Belle had finally made it to Taboga Island. How irascible she had been when the rod bent over, the line tugging with life. He had shouted directions from the tiller and she had finally boated her prey—a speckled yellow popoia full of play. "Jimmy, Jimmy, isn't it the gem of the seven seas? And did you see how I slipped off the hook?" And she had run to him and hugged his neck, and the spray on her lips had tasted salty.

His reminiscent smile faded. He supposed he should have told Belle he was going. He had started to write her a note, but the pen began to whine as soon as it had informed. "Dearest Belle—I'm off to Cruces with one of Nelson's gold trains. I'm hoping we can show the hill boys that they can't get away with murder. I expect to be back in time to see your show tomorrow night." Then the pen had taken over. "Why am I going? Well, I'm not just certain, but maybe it's my way of turning a somersault for you. Maybe I'm ashamed of the way I've been acting, moping around like an old crapehanger, making you miserable when all I want to do is make you happy. Maybe I have some notion of coming back a hero to find you waiting with arms outstretched. 'Jim!' you'll cry with delight and relief in your flower face and maybe a tear or two in those lovely pistache eyes. That's what I want, Belle. I want to see that you're glad I'm back, and how can I do that unless I go away?" He had felt the eyes of his sister, Clarissa, on the page, imagined her lips curling with scorn for a self-pitying man. Man, nothing. Sounded like a lovesick kid. He had crumpled the note and thrown it into the wastebasket beside his desk. That wastebasket amused him as much as it annoyed Lucius. Upended and lined with canvas, it was Belle's discarded hoop.

The mule train rode past the pastel townhouses, faded pinks and yellows and blues, their balconies hung with crosses of green palmetto, freshly woven, recently blessed. They filed under the arched gateway of Puerta de Tierra, past the produce markets that smelled like mulled wine and swarmed with intoxicated bees and flies and gnats. Past the black-draped Santa Ana church, the emigrants' higgledy-piggledy tents. Past the shrine, the ruined fountain. The turn-off where a larger newer sign pointed the way to THE COCONUT GROVE HOTEL AND RESTAURANT, the turn-off to the cemetery where the bones of Tío Carlos had been laid to rest. An occasional hut on the side of the road, the inevitable figure leaning in the doorway. Argonauts, on foot and on mules, their red shirts patched with perspiration, their jeans pulled low on their hips with the weight of their gun belts. "How far to Panama, Doc?" "What's the name of a good hotel, Buster?" A few grey pigs wallowing in a mud-shallow. A hairless dog watching with the eyes of a wounded woman.

The paving of the Old Panama Road fell away and the forest closed overhead. The interlacing of leaves shut out the day, and the air was suffocating—hot, damp, fetid, overused. The heart began to pump harder, the body to ooze sweat.

Juan, at the head of the train, looked back. "Hola!" he called, and he waved. Jim waved his slouch hat. "Hola, compadre!" The exchange was oddly heartening. Jim had forgotten how oppressive the jungle was. How steep the prickly cliffs, how hostile the silence, how enervating the steam. The animals plodded patiently through the sinuous pass, stumbling over fallen trunks of trees and clay boulders, leaping over holes. Fragments of the old Spanish paving were still scattered throughout the gorge, now little more than stumbling blocks. Jim's clothes clung to him as if he'd been in a downpour. He took a swig from his water canteen, drank deeply of the cool sweet water. Yet a moment later his mouth felt cotton-lined. He looked up at the thick brush that lined the ledges of the canyon. Two armed men concealed behind any leafy clump

could pick off their little train as easily as boys throwing pebbles into a stream.

Suddenly, from either side of the ravine, there came a screaming of parrots and monkeys. It was worse than the silence. It was like bursting in on a disturbed ward of the insane. Jim controlled an urge to shoot his pistol off into the trees. There was something about a bunch of arrogant scolding monkeys that made a man want to assert his superiority. When the argument was left behind, the silence came down again, close, ominous. Jim's eyes raked the brush for telltale movement.

Jim smiled as he recognized Juan's off-beat rendition of "Yankee Doodle." When the song ended, Jim, to bolster the long range canwaraderie, let his baritone ring down the ravine :

*"Oh, what was your name in the States,
Was it Thompson or Johnson or Bates,
Did you murder you wife
And fly for your life,
Say, what was your name in the States?"*

The reverberant canyon was as flattering to the larynx as a mountaintop or a waterfall. Jim and Juan let themselves go. Each knew that their lusty carolling might well be alerting an ambush or drowning out the warning sound of gunfire ahead. They sang on, first one and then the other. It was a kind of nose-thumbing they were indulging in together, and if it robbed them of caution, it also cleansed them of fear.

They stopped around noon at an American canteen called Halfway House, which, despite its hospitable title, was only a canvas tent about twelve feet square. Weary travellers rested inside on the few cots or sat on boxes and rickety chairs around the trestle table. They plied Jim with questions. What were the chances of shipping out of Panama in a hurry? Was there as much sickness as rumored? Where could they put up? How far did the American dollar go in Panama? What did the returning prospectors have to say—were the gold fields

holding up? Jim answered their queries while he gulped salt pork and beans and bitter coffee. The proprietor, a pale, ragged Kentuckian, was sorry the beer was gone. There had been several mule trains passing through that morning. When the shifty-eyed fellow began to question Jim about the nature of their cargo, Jim signalled to Juan, paid the bill, and quickly departed.

From Halfway House on, the arduous trail required undivided attention. Here the road wound through spurs of the Cordillera. In some places the rain had washed avalanches of clay down from the sides of the cliffs so that the road itself became a series of hills. They climbed up and slid down, climbed up and slid down the hissing shards of baked earth.

They had been single-filing through a narrow pass when Juan put his hand up. The mule train halted. Jim rode forward.

"Qué tal?" Jim asked softly.

Juan shrugged, frowning.

The two men walked their horses the few yards to the end of the gorge where the road right-angled through a level grassy space of several hundred yards before it cut again through another brush-covered hill. In the open space a bald black vulture perched on a wooden cross decorated with old tinsel and ribbons. As they watched, another bird circled and winged down from the sky and sat beside the first.

"Zopilotes," Juan whispered. "I see the first one come down. Maybe only some dead panther. Here is panther grounds. But maybe not panther, maybe muleteer, no?"

For several silent moments they watched the clearing, searched the canyon ledges ahead for a sign of life. The horses flicked their tails at the pesky gnats. The vultures stood waiting, erect, on the cross. A swarm of brilliant blue butterflies dipped and fluttered over a damp spot on the sunny grass. Juan went back to tether the lead mules to a bush that sprouted from a crevice in the cliff.

"Vamonos, señor. We take a look. The mules will rest here."

They crossed the clearing slowly, their horses abreast. The heat rose in waves from the ground. The sun on the brush-covered hill was as quiet as time passing. The vultures stared. Jim, close enough to see the coarse black hairs around their nostrils, turned away from their malevolent eyes.

They saw the body lying face downward just inside the bottleneck. A machete stuck up between the shoulder blades. Juan dismounted, ran forward, rolled the naked body over. An Indian face, streaked with green phosphorescent paint. The machete had gone through to the chest.

"Hill man—Cimarrón," Juan said, holding up his wet fingers to show Jim how recently death had struck. Juan pulled out the machete, wiped it on an elephant-ear leaf, stuck the machete next to his own in his breechclout. He hawked his throat, spat down into the white bulging eyes. Then he screamed and pitched forward on top of the dead Indian. A bejuco spear, firm in Juan's back, vibrated with his fall.

Jim aimed his pistol into the swaying brush on the right bank, but before he could shoot, a cross fire broke out over his head from ledge top to ledge top. He slid down the flank of his horse, his pistol cocked, but he held his fire, bewildered. The gunfire played from both sides of the bisected hill. If it were Nelson's men on the left hill, would they not have called out a warning when he and Juan approached the pass? Were the Cimarróns fighting each other? A shot slapped dust at his boots. He jumped aside. Another shot exploded a body out of the left hilltop into the air. The distorted face was unpainted, the hips tied with a breechclout. One of Nelson's men! Quickly Jim scrambled up the sheer left bank on all fours. A bullet whistled past his ear. He dropped to his belly, wriggled snakewise to the top where two mulunteers crouched behind the screen of foliage. At their feet sprawled their dead comrade.

"Alto fuego. Hold your fire," Jim whispered, arranging the dead body as a barricade. They crouched behind it, shoulder to shoulder. A shot split the corpse's head. Jim simulated a gurgling scream of pain, shot several times rapidly across the

gully. A return volley of shots splintered the earth around them, jerked the dead carcass again and again. Each muleteer, following Jim's example, screamed once and was silent. Behind the length of the peppered body they lay unmoving through two more volleys of gunfire. Then through the leaves, they saw six—eight naked Indians rise from the brush. Six ran toward the sky. Two came down the hill, one to retrieve the spear in Juan's body, the other to take the riderless horses.

The three men watched the last two bandits spur the horses up the opposite cliff, disappear over the crest. Jim held up a warning finger. They lay quietly in the oozing blood of their shield. At last, Jim stood up, flexed his legs. At his nod, the muleteers got up, their bodies smeared with blood and dust and sweat.

"They got the others?"

The muleteers nodded.

"They were in a hurry to get back to count that gold, I guess," Jim said, his eyes on the skyline. "Didn't even come over for a look."

When they reached Juan's body, Jim turned it over, closed the eyes. "Adiós, compadre. You sang loud and well." He looked up. "We'll bury him. He was a brave man."

They carried Juan to the foot of the wooden cross. The vultures retired to the high branches of a rotted leafless tree.

While their machetes chomped at the earth, the muleteers made rueful confession. At Halfway House the guards of the first train had waited for the second. They had decided that their forward position was the most dangerous, and since they had taken the risks during the first half of the journey, they felt that the others should now trade places with them. The guards of the second train, however, preferred their own safer position. While they argued, the third contingent arrived. To settle the matter, it was decided that for the rest of the trip, the three groups would travel together. The string of mules had stretched half a mile. They were within the confines of the hillpass when the Cimarróns descended upon the front of the

train. The three rearmost muleteers ran for cover up the cliff, hoping that the bandits would think there was no tailguard. From their vantage point, they saw their fellows speared or shot down in cold blood. The loaded mules were spanked up a crosstrail into the hills. One of the raiders was evidently sent to check for rear guards. An ambushed muleteer dropped him with a machete so as to make no noise. But then, more bandits had come gunning down the pass. They had no sooner encountered their own knifed man than Jim and Juan appeared on their horses at the mouth of the gorge. By the grace of God, the bandits had run for cover up the right cliff instead of the left.

The muleteers stopped digging to cross themselves.

It was clear they had been unwilling to give away their position by a warning sound, and it had taken Juan's murder to draw their fire. At that, Jim supposed, they had behaved no worse than most men whose lives hang in the balance. At least they had been finally goaded out of their self-protection to vengeful action.

At his quiet comment, "Yo comprendo," some of the furtive shame went out of the dark, perspiring faces.

"There remains," he pointed out, "the bulk of the specie to be delivered to Cruces. We'll wait till nightfall. The Cimarróns believe they have the whole load, they won't be on the lookout. But we'll play it safe with darkness for cover. You know the trail, amigos. Do you know it well enough to follow it in the dark?"

The two men nodded, eager to redeem themselves.

"Good. We'll double the loads of three of the mules and we'll ride the other three."

"Are there not seven mules, señor?"

"The seventh will carry the body of the Cimarrón you killed. I have a better place for it than the bellies of buzzards."

The *Falcon's* second batch of passengers had arrived in Panama, jamming the Tiger saloon. Belle sat with Captain

Hartstein at a table near the stairs, her eyes flying at every footfall to the archway. Customers came and went. But no Blackbird.

"It's near time for the show," Belle said. "All the times I pictured you coming in here and me strutting my feathers for you, and now there's not a tune in my head nor a bounce in my slipper. Ah, God . . . I found a note in his wastebasket, do you see, and that was how I knew he'd gone haring off with a mule train of gold for Pacific Mail. There's Mr. Nelson over at that table with Lucius. See how glum he looks, for we surely expected Jim back last night. What aches me is, he threw the note away. Now what made him do a thing like that? It started off 'Dearest Belle' the way I sounded it out, so he loved me well enough at the beginning. What changed his mind, I keep wondering. The fact is, I fear I've tried him sorely these last weeks."

"Tried him? In what way?"

Belle sighed. Even to the good captain, she could not come clean. But half-truths were better than none, and she had to talk or burst. "Oh, I've flimmed and I've flammed, tired with work and eaten up with worry that at the last Lucius will stop us from getting away. As a result, we've come to quarrel a good bit, Jim and I, not really differing at the core but picking and pecking and nagging and ragging till what does he do but go off and try to get himself killed by a bunch of robbers. I tell you, Captain, if he's lying in a ditch somewheres right now the fault is purely mine. Because he's not a quarrelsome man by nature, don't I know that. Gentle as violets in a glen he is, Captain, and so strong, so sure of life, so boyish in his pride, so confident that God's got an arm around his shoulders that it touches the marrow of your bones. To lose a creature like that would be to lose the light of day. Would you believe it, Captain, I found myself in his room this morning, petting that hunk of printing press like it was a kitten for no other reason than it's the dearest thing he owns."

"Poor child, calm down, dear, drink your lemonade," Cap-

tain Hartstein soothed. "He'll be back. If he's smart and as strong as legend has it, it'll take more than robbers to put him away. Sounds like you found the right man all right. Never did approve of Talent. Be glad to see you out of this skin game. The sooner the better. You don't look well, Belle. Thin as a rail and pale as milk. Had' rosy cheeks the last time I saw you. Staying up all night, breathing this foul smoked air, not good for you, not good at all. Bad climate too. Miracle you haven't taken the fever. Hope you're wearing flannel next to your skin. They say-----"

The cluckings of the fatherly old fellow fell like spring rain on her parched heart. She put her hand on his hairy one. "And tell me, how was your trip? And did you ever think to find an establishment like the Tiger in these few short months?"

Captain Hartstein's reply was lost under Belle's cry as Jim Rideout, bearded and filthy, appeared at the top of the stairs. Belle's skirts swept her chair over in her rush to him. He picked her up off the ground and her feet dangled in the air as they kissed.

The men packed around the pair, pressing for details of the adventure. Jim carried Belle to the counter of the bar and he leaned on his elbow beside her. The saloon quieted. A drink was put in Jim's hand. He took a few swallows and then he told the story of the Cruces trail. He told of the attack at the gorge, of the death of the stout-hearted Juan, of the safe delivery of all but the small portion of gold that had been allotted the vanguard. And he told what he had done with the body of the Cimarrón he had brought back. "Right now," he concluded, "there's a dead Indian hanging from the olive tree at the landgate. Maybe that'll teach the savages that we Americans mean business."

The men cheered a brave ending to a brave story.

Promised Nelson, "We'll back up your challenge, Jim! We'll triple the guard on the next gold train. And we'll triple the number of thieves hung at the landgate if they dare to attack!"

Belle caught Manuel's anxious eye, the disapproving shake of his head. She slipped down.

"What is it, Manuel? What were you shaking your head for?"

"This is not good, patróna. To hang the body on the tree is to invite vengeance. Your man begs for trouble."

Belle glanced back over her shoulder. At Jim's dark craggy face lit with the fire of tested manhood, at the ring of heads upturned in adulation.

"Then dart off, Manuel," she said with sudden decision. "Take one of the boys along, you'll need a bit of help. Get the body down and dump it into the sea. I'm as proud as the rest of his fine hardy deeds, but it's a wedding I want, not a wake."

"At once, patróna."

He nodded to one of the bar boys and the two of them disappeared toward the kitchen. Belle made her way back to Jim's side.

"I told Belle you were a bad penny," Lucius was saying, and though he smiled with the muscles of his mouth, he called out to Ramon for drinks on the house.

"Glad to know you, Jim Rideout," Captain Hartstein said, jowls shaking as he pumped the young man's hand. "I'm Hartstein, skipper of the *Falcon*. We were in port the day you fished your printing press out of the headwaters of the Mississippi. Belle was watching you through the ship's glass and you should have heard her squeal!"

Everyone laughed.

"Glad to know you, sir," Jim said. "Belle often talks of you."

Belle beamed, took Jim's arm possessively. "Now come along for a bite to eat. Benancia's held supper for two nights. We were all worried sick."

"Well, tell her to heat up the vittles while I clean off this mud." Jim let himself be led, gratified at Belle's public show of concern. "Don't go away nêw, Captain. There's a lot we have to talk about."

Belle sat quiet as a lady, hands folded in her lap, as Jim and

the captain conversed over baked chicken and frijoles. Hartstein told of the spread of gold fever in the States, and Jim told of the spread of crime on the isthmus. Of the traffic in such fraudulent products as maps of the gold fields, mining gadgets, water filters. Of the two Argonauts who shot out a disagreement at "handkerchief's length." Of the black marketeering in quinine. Belle only half listened, luxuriating not in the man-talk but in the role of a girl who has just introduced her "intended" to a member of the family and found them compatible.

"Where are you staying, Captain?" Jim inquired.

"Looks like I'll have to settle for a park bench," Hartstein said, smiling into the cuff of his beard. "This town's filled up some since I was here last."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, sir. I have two rooms. You'll have my bed. I'll bunk with good old Bess, my printing press. Wouldn't be the first time."

"Ah, that's dear of you, Jim."

"I couldn't put you out, son."

"I'd be honoured, Captain."

"Well then, I'd be obliged to you. The night air in Panama——"

The two men turned in early.

Belle was at the faro table when she saw Manuel come in. Between games, she excused herself on a pretext, and sought him out.

"Is it done then, lad?"

Manuel gave her a dour look. "There was nothing to do, *patrona*. The olive tree was alone and silent. Nothing hangs from it but its own leaves."

Belle's hand flew to her breast. "Manuel! What does it mean?"

Manuel shrugged. "*Quien sabe?*"

In the morning, however, the meaning was clear. Captain Hartstein was found dead in the bed, a bejuco spear through his back. The shutters of one of the windows had been opened to the night air he so distrusted.

CHAPTER XVII

MAUNDY THURSDAY PANAMA was locked up tight. The stores and banks were closed, the markets and stalls empty behind their bamboo curtains. No vehicle was permitted on the streets. Outside the stone wall that enclosed the rear grounds of the Tiger, Ramon sat dozing in the shade of the overhanging pepper. Beside him, balled up in his sombrero, snoozed Coco, the monkey. Señor Talent thought he was at Mass. Manuel and Nicasia thought he was washing glasses. Bueno. A man had to catch up on his sleep. If it were left to the Yanquis, sleep would be banned by law. They did not even respect the siesta. Work, work, work—they would rather work than make love. No wonder they were all rich. It was too bad a man did not get paid for making love. Then Ramon de Bega would be rich too. Love and money. Both good, muy agrad-able, but to sleep, ah, that was the best, no? Well, then, second to best. Yes, that was the way it was. First love and then sleep and then money. The very best would be to lie asleep with a fat young girl (Nicasia was skinny, still it was possible she would fill out) on a bed of American greenbacks—a big bed, high as a haystack—and nearby, say, the length of one's arm, a bottle of wine and the leg of turkey . . . ai-ee, who could ask for more?

Ramon's spine stiffened as low voices pierced the wall, scattering daydream.

"To think I was trying to do him a favour."

"Ah, God, lad, how could you dream? When I think that it was him or you, God forgive me, I can't truly find the proper

tears. But oh, he was a dear and good man. A finer man never wore a scarlet coat in the courts of Rome."

"I know. I know. I liked him at once. At first I was drawn to him, I suppose, because I knew he had been good to you. Then I just liked him. I still can't believe it—only last night he—— Incredible. Sickening. And I have this awful guilty feeling inside. I mean, that it was my fault. But how could I know?"

"You could not. It's a twist of fate, look at it so. Hindsight's a poor way of seeing things."

Ah, sí. El capitán. Muerto. Los Cimarrónes, they did not play games. He could have told El Gigante that. Manuelito, the little cousin, had been very brave to go to the landgate to fetch the body. He would not have gone. Not for money would he have touched the body of el Cimarrón.

The voices stopped. Ramon eased his cramped neck.

"Querer not to hear the bells nor the hoofs nor the wheels nor a sound in the street. It's like the very air was grieving."

Coco raised his head. Ramon stroked the little head down.

"The thing is, Jim, we've not a moment to lose. We've got to get away. Word travels like prairie fire in this country. They know already they got the wrong man. They'll be searching for you."

"I know. I've been thinking. The Tiger bulletin board says the *Undine* is due to leave tonight at midnight. It's a barque, only a hundred and seventy-five passengers, and full up, of course. Goodberry's on the list, by the way. He could marry us aboard ship. I'm going to talk to Mr. Nelson. Maybe he can squeeze us in somehow. We could leave tonight after the Tiger closes. Nelson has the authority to delay departure, if necessary. But what will we use for money? A hundred is all I've saved. The fare is two hundred and fifty per person."

"We'll use my black pearl, that's what."

"No, I won't have that. Forget that."

"I could nab De Soto between masses. He's the one wants to buy it. I'll catch him when he comes out of the cathedral."

"No, I won't let you do that, but there's the printing press. She's worth a lot more than five hundred. I could sell her to the *Panama Star*."

"And what would we eat on in San Francisco if you did? Oh, Jim, I've been poor. You don't know what it is to go hungry——"

"When I think of all that money of yours in the safe. Money you worked to earn——"

"Jim! You promised me—on your sacred word of honour——"

"Well, just tell me, what could he do?"

"He could kill, that's what, kill you the same as those Indians could. Only he wouldn't miss. You don't know him, I tell you. Oh, Jim, haven't we got trouble enough without you looking for more? I'll tell you what. Ask Mr. Nelson if he'll let you go steerage for the hundred. Or bunk in with Reverend Goodberry if he's willing, and send Nelson the rest of the money from San Francisco. Then I'll follow on the *Niantic* as we planned. Might be I'll get there before you even—who knows what the journey will be like?"

"Belle, you can whistle that note till you're blue in the face, I won't hear it. I told you I'm not leaving this port without you. There are too many hazards. You're coming with me or I don't go. What do you think life means to me without you?"

"And what do you think you mean to me without life?"

"Listen, Miss Sauce, you keep a civil tongue in your head, or I'll paddle you good."

"Ho—I'd like to see you try!"

"Oh, you would, eh? Well then——"

"Eek! Jim—you——!"

The laughter roused Coco as the voices had not. Before Ramon could grab him, he was up over the wall.

"Oo-ee! Cripes—a rat's up my skirt!"

"It's only Coco, honey—look. Scat, Coco, get away."

"I hate the blasted furry things!"

Ramon caught Coco as he leaped from the top of the wall, held him fast, stroking him firmly.

"I hope he gets lost—run down in the street."

"Not today he won't get run down. Now, Belle, calm yourself. You're a bundle of nerves. He's a smart little scalawag. He knows you hate his teasing—that's why he does it."

"It's not only I don't like little creatures, Jim. But where Coco is, Ramon's not far behind. Do you think he could be lurking in the bushes some wheres, cavedropping on the two of us? I wouldn't put it past him."

"Not a chance. He's in church. That's why Coco's on the loose."

"Oh, Jim, hold me fast. I *am* nervy."

"Don't be, dearest. Trust me—I'll take care of you. God willing, I'll always take care of you."

In the silence, little juicy sounds as of oranges sucked. Ramon squirmed in identification. Coco scratched a flea in his ear, his button eyes questioning Ramon's drowsy grin. A rustle of silks. Grass-padded footsteps. "Nicasia to pack your things . . . only what you need . . . hard enough to get the press aboard, let alone——" The voice died in the distance. A bee settled on Ramon's wrist. He didn't move a vein. The bee buzzed off. A hummingbird plunged deep into a fuchsia blossom, backed out, plunged again. Busy, busy, hurry, hurry. Even the bees and the birds. Foolish, no? The day was long. The flowers were many. Sometimes it paid just to sit still.

Night fell. The natives' homes remained dark. The black-clad worshippers crept on foot to and from the moon-grey churches, silent as shadows. Islands of light and sound in the devout town were the American taverns to which the homeless aliens flocked, eager to be penned. They drank twice as much as usual, shouted louder, plunged heavily at the gaming tables.

Business at the Tiger was unduly brisk. The day had been hot, the night was humid, and although the shutters and doors

were flung wide to receive the slightest breath from the sea, the cigar smoke and brandy fumes and body sweat hung close. Impatient for the faro game, the men shot dice in the candle-lit corners and played thimblrig on the table tops. Lucius darted about, dipping for a word here, a side bet there. In his red-topped gaiters, tapered pearl-grey trousers, his bright blue coat alive with brass buttons, he stood out among the unwashed horde like a dragonfly in a swamp bed of cat-tails. And yet, far from resenting the dandy, the Argonauts accorded him homage, fawned when he singled them out for greeting, found in his anomalous elegance a measure of reassurance. They might sneer at him among themselves in the morning, but tonight they responded to the indomitable glamour of the man, and the bask of it dispersed the Lenten gloom they had fought all day.

Even Belle, distracted as she was, sensed a dynamism in Lucius. Influenced by Jim, she no longer admired his penchant for fancy dress. "The only males in the animal kingdom who outdo their females in plumage," Jim pointed out, "are birds. And what do we call the silly fellows who imitate them? Listen : coxcombs, peacocks, popinjays!" So it was not Lucius' new coat that impressed her. Rather, she noted the hot blue inward eye, the bouncy precision of his movements, the elaborate if slightly abstracted courtesy.

"Ah, go on," she scolded herself, "you're nervy, that's what. Feverish and frightened at the very time when pluck is needed. Now, come on, my girl, pull yourself together, put a cool front on yourself, you've had enough practice at it."

It was impossible that Lucius should have a glimmer of their plans. She and Jim had not conversed since the morning and then they had sneaked to the back of the grounds to do so. She had sorted out her clothing in the privacy of her quarters all the afternoon and no one had disturbed her. Lucius had crossed the courtyard once and she had locked her door against a possible visit, but he'd gone directly to the stables and directly back. It had been a hard thing to say goodbye to the

ball dresses and the lace mantles and the satin cloaks, the crinolines, the scarves, the pelisses, the mitts, the fans, the reticules, but she had been strict as a nun about it. She choose to take four of the simplest gowns—two for summer, the sprigged primrose and the changeable plaid silk, and two for winter, the blue serge and the black merino which she would travel in tonight. One pelerine, the green one because it made her eyes look greener and because it was banded with mink fur, and a cashmere shawl. A pair of boots and a pair of slippers, two bonnets in case one should blow overboard, four pairs of gloves because she was forever losing a single, six pairs of hose and a few changes of linen. (The nightgown Lucius had caught her in, she had torn into strips and poked into a corner of the closet. Nicasia should have all that she left behind, but not that, oh, not the nightgown, because there might be a curse on it—an evil spinster had probably sewed it and mayhap pricked her finger while she worked, leaving on it a drop of her tainted blood.) That was all in the world she was taking with her to married life, those few coverings and the silk pouch which was silent now, filled not with lightly ringing buttons but with two thousand American greenbacks, for no matter what Jim said, they should not go as paupers to the new land. While Nicasia had picked up the room and packed Belle's things in the straw valise, Manuel had sped with the black pearl in his pocket to the house of De Soto. "Have no fear, little Tiger, Señor de Soto is as eager to keep the secret as we. He plans to surprise his wife with the present on Easter Day. It was he who cautioned me to say nothing to anyone of the purchase. And as for Señor Talent, before I left, I observed that he was in his rooms in his dressing gown and when I returned, he was there still, still in his siesta apparel."

At sundown, Jim had passed under her window, giving the sweet mocking-bird whistle they had agreed upon should Mr. Nelson have secured places for them on the *Undine*. Nicasia and Belle had hugged each other then, and shed a few tears. "Oh, I will miss you, little sister. Go with God, go with God."

Within the hour, Belle, dressed in the pink grenadine gauze (a final fling at finery, and the pink gave a little colour to her liverish cheeks), crossed the courtyard to meet Lucius for the nightly conference about the night's game. In the saloon the candles were already lit. The girls lolled at the tables, the musicians tuned up behind their stands, Ramon, with Coco perched on his shoulder, smiled his meaching smile behind the froth of glasses on the bar.

"Buenas noches, Tigrita."

"Buenas noches, Ramon. I'll thank you to keep Coco to yourself tonight. I'm in no mood for his teases."

In the anteroom Lucius preened and pranced, nimble as a pea on a drumhead.

"We'll use the tie-ups tonight, Belle."

"Why not the sanders or the strippers? I'm not up to snuff, Lucius. I'm coming down with a cold, I think, and the tie-ups take a bit of handling."

"Well, just use them for the first snap then. I've prepared a new deck because I found a finer needle. And I've tied the pierced cards with a hair plucked fresh from my horse's tail. I've also oiled the box and tested the inside plate again and again. It cuts the hair like a hot knife cuts butter. But don't take my word for it. Try it."

She took the horsehair he dangled, objecting listlessly, "This one's grey—it'll show."

"Now, Belle, you know perfectly well I used a black one for the cards. I only experiment with light ones so I can see what I'm doing."

She pulled the grey hair through the dealing box. The edge of the inside plate cut it cleanly in two. The hair left a tiny spot of grease on her fingertip. "It cuts all right."

"Here, look at the cards. I want you to see for yourself."

She accepted the four tied pairs he handed her, thinking, *This is the last time, the last time in this life I'll touch a card, crooked or honest, so help 'me' Jesus.* The needle holes were punched so as to become part of the pattern on the backs and

part of the periphery of the symbols on the fronts—invisible to the naked eye. The knots were miniscule, discernible by touch only, and the players would only see, not feel, the cards. She had to hand it to Lucius, he surely took pains. She remembered something he had said to her during the training period aboard the *Falcon*. "Trifles make perfection and perfection is no trifle." It took a fussy man as well as a clever one to achieve this degree of perfection, and Lucius was nothing if not both. Of all the things that might go awry this night, detection by the suckers was the unlikeliest.

"They're all right," she acknowledged sullenly.

He put a hand on her hot forehead. "You do look a little peaked, but I doubt it's a cold. Your eyes are bright, and you don't sound nasal. You're probably more upset by the captain's death than you're admitting. He was always fatherly to you. And I suppose you're upset too by the danger your friend, Jim, is in. He ought to get out of town fast. . . . Why are you wearing a cross instead of the pearl?"

The cards dropped from her hand. "Because it's a holy night."

He stooped to retrieve the cards. "Steady, little one, steady. He's as safe in the Tiger as in a church, so perk up and stop worrying. Keep your mind on the game—first things first, eh? We'll worry about later later. The reason I want you to use this deck for the first snap is that it will give the bank the last four cases. The pigeons are panting to plunge tonight—I gather this from the reports of the day's activity in the other houses, and as you know, it's on the last turns that they place their heaviest bets. We'll clean up. Just remember after you shuffle, you cut the deck above the tie-ups. They must remain on the bottom of the deck."

"I know, I know. Don't keep telling and telling me, it gets on a person's nerves."

"I'm sorry, my dear. It's for your own good."

Just what all the oldies said when they meant theirs.

She took the arm he crooked to her, but she could not force a smile when he whispered, "You're pretty as a rosebud to-

night. We make a rather handsome pair, don't you think?" What she would have given to hear those words not four months ago! She felt a pull of pity for the little greenhorn who had worshipped this vain villain as a Brian Boru. *What I'm thinking, I'm not telling, you old blackleg*, but she said nothing, merely scraped her feet as he led her into the saloon.

The faro game routinely opened at eight, and on the dot of eight, Jim came in and took his seat on Belle's left.

"Good evening, Belle—Lucius."

"*There* you are, darling."

"Evening, Jim. Haven't seen you all day."

"No."

"Trying to keep out of harm's way?"

"That's right."

"Can't say I blame you after what happened. Ought to get out of Panama."

"Easier said than done."

"There are ways."

"If one has the means."

"There are ways of getting the means." Lucius buffed his nails on his coat, casually inspected them. "I might be able to help you out."

"I'll manage."

"Rideout's a proud man, Talent," one of the Argonauts remarked. "He don't take help from nobody."

"So I notice," Lucius replied amiably. "Still I'd rather lose my pride than my life, wouldn't you?"

Jim's sternly boyish "No, I wouldn't" was lost in the laughter, caught only by Belle whose eyes yearned over her freshly shaven, water-combed husband-to-be. She gained from the clean, hard jaw, the quiet dark of his glance, and lost it at the sight of the tuft of black hair that curled in the V of his open shirt. A shiver sped, hot and cold, under her flesh. In a few more hours——

"Well, little one—are you going to dream or are you going to deal?"

She started. "Oh—ready, then?"

"Been ready and waiting since six o'clock, little lady."

"Maybe there's things she and Rideout would rather do than play cards—eh, Tiger Belle?"

"Not a thing in the world, mister. What'll you open for?"

She was shuffling the deck when Lucius put a hand on her arm, jerked his head at Ramon who stood behind her.

"Nothing for me, Ramon. I'll have a Blue Moon later."

"No, patróna, it is Nicasia. She begs a word with you in the little parlour."

Belle looked quickly to Jim who was absorbed in finger-drumming on the baize, then to Lucius. Lucius gave his permission with a reassuring nod and smile.

"I won't be a minute," Belle apologized nervously. "Excuse me, gents. I'll hurry back."

Lucius took a sip of his brandy. Then he pushed the deck to Jim. "Shuffle for her, Jim. Save time."

"Oh, gosh, no, not me. I'm no hand at cards."

"Better an honest hand than a skilled onc, eh, boys?"

At the hearty chorus of agreement, Jim blushed and picked up the deck. It was one thing to hold aloof from gambling on a moral basis, quite another to be shown up as a rube. Intent on avoiding ridicule, Jim halved the deck carefully, carefully butted in the halves. Someone yelled he'd bite his tongue off if he didn't haul it in. Jim chuckled, embarrassed, and, imprisoning his tongue behind set lips, he repeated the shuffling action with a little more speed.

"All thumbs, eh—lookit him go!"

"A gaffer if I ever saw onc."

"This boy's a leg—he was just pulling ours!"

"Now he'll miss, trying to make it look hard. Watch."

In that instant, Jim's palms blew the halved deck into his lap.

"See—what'd I tell you!"

"Don't blame me," Jim defended himself. "I warned you——"

The table was uproarious.

Under it, Jim, on his knees, picked up the scattered cards. He was so long at it, the men began to ride him again.

"Hey—Buster—there's only fifty-two down there."

"Hate to have him try to hook up my wife!"

"What do you expect with paws the size of——"

The hilarity froze in mid-cry as Jim's face appeared above the table—unsmiling, black with blood, eyes hard on Lucius' crooked grin.

The anteroom was empty. Hurried, bewildered, Belle ran through the stone hall, calling, "Nicasia—Nicasia!" Where the devil was the girl? The kitchen door swung open at her slap. Benancia and the second girls looked up.

"Donde esta Nicasia?"

Belle ran from their blank looks, up the stairs.

"Nicasia! Nicasia!"

She flung in and out of Lucius' rooms, back down the stairs, peeked once more into the anteroom. Drat the girl—with all of them waiting. And Lucius, no doubt steaming like a kettle on the hob. Well, enough time wasted—Nicasia knew where to find her.

She had not passed the apron of the bar when she saw Jim push the faro table over with one hand. It pinned Lucius and all the men on that side in their chairs, now tipped over on the floor. Her scream was lost in the wash of sound the walls gave back. Jim was making his way across the room, parting the men and the tables and the chairs with both hands. Some of the men jumped aside from the juggernaut. Some toppled with their chairs. She tried to call him—poor suffering Blackbird, what had they done to him, *or did she know?*—but she couldn't move her lips, and the name chimed again and again, splitting her head—Jim, Jim, Jim *Jim*! She watched him pull Ramon out from behind the bar and toss him over his shoulder like a sack of flour. Another boy ran out, crouched, from behind the bar, scurried past her. Then Jim put his widespread

hands against the solid mahogany and pushed with all the force of his bulk. Grunting, because she could feel him grunt, she watched the face go darker, watched the veins swell to the size of tree roots—ah, God, would his brains burst their shell before her very eyes? The bar, tipping now under the steady irresistible pressure, fell ponderously into the mirror behind it. The mirror streaked jaggedly like ice cracking on a pond. The tinkling of broken bottles and glasses, the slurping of liquids continued for a few incredible seconds after the crash. She watched Jim straighten slowly, with effort, his chest rising and falling like agitated water. She watched him stumble across the room and turn, with his hand out like a man gone blind, to the stairs. Not until he was out of her sight, did her own wind give out. She took quick shallow animal gasps, trying for air, but a sudden wave of nausea weakened her, and she knew she was fainting. She backed to the wall, trying to go down slowly with the wall to break her slump.

She came to on her bed in her room. She lifted first one heavy hot lid and then the other. She almost laughed. Nicasia in her white leghorn hat and the green tarlatan. Little brown girl lost. But each little brown hand clutched a rose on the skirt, and Lucius was scolding.

"Lay off, Lucius. I gave her those duds."

Instantly he was beside her, his hands on her head. "Burn-ing up. Get her undressed, Nicasia. Sponge her with brandy. I'm going for a doctor."

"I'm thirsty."

The water pouring reminded her. She saw again the mirror cracking, saw the black blind rocklike face, the quivering veins in the thick neck. She sipped the water, then grabbed the blue sleeve.

"Wait!"

"I'll be right back, Belle—my house is being saddled now."

Her nails scraped the cloth. , ,

"He knows, doesn't he? That's what made me go berserk."

Lucius hesitated.

"Tell me!"

He gently disengaged her hand. "The deck fell down. He picked up the cards. He said, 'She's all yours, Talent. I won't wish you luck. You don't need luck. You just need each other.' And then he dumped the table on me and—well, you saw."

She fell back on the pillow.

"It's just as well, little one. Believe me, it's better this way. You'd have gone mad trying to be something you're not. It's made you ill."

There was a kind of relief in knowing that Jim knew. The scalding tears, heated by her eyelids, slipped down her face.

"Don't cry, Belle, please. I can't endure it. When you're feeling better, you'll realize it all happened for the best."

"Go along, Lucius. I'm too sick for preaching."

She let Nicasia roll her over and unhook the tight, scratchy bodice. She drew a deep breath.

"Is he gone?"

"Si, querida."

"You were trying on the clothes."

"Si. How could I know that he would come in? But he suspects nothing. It is believable that you would give me a single dress and hat of which you grew tired. Ai-ai, that you should fall sick on this night of all nights. Do you think you will be able to get to the ship?"

"No. Jim Rideout will sail without me. Nicasia, did you tell Ramon to call me out tonight around eight o'clock?"

"Rest, do not talk. Your mind wanders. It is the fever."

"Do you fear catching it?"

"I catch nothing. I serve you with love."

"And you surely didn't come to the little parlour—to show me how dear you looked in the gown?"

"You think I am giddy? No. I have been in this room alone since sundown. I have seen no one." She slipped the nightgown over Belle's head. "Now, lie quiet, por favor. I must take off this beautiful dress. I would not spill brandy on it. I will bathe

one part of you at a time while the rest of you remains under the blanket. That way you will not take a chill. I am a thoughtful nurse, no? Manuel's mother has taught me these things. I enjoy to nurse."

"Nicasia, was Ramon in church with you this morning?"

"This morning, no. He was obliged to wash many glasses. This afternoon, yes. He kneeled beside me at the twelve o'clock Mass, and when I wept for the sufferings of our Lord, he gave me his handkerchief to dry my eyes."

"Quick, a bowl. I'm going to vomit."

Nicasia held Belle's head, and then wiped her lips and sponged her face and gave her water. Belle lay limp and silent while Nicasia bathed her fevered arms and limbs.

"Sleep now, Hermanita mía. I will close my eyes too, but I will hear if you call."

Sleep? Holy Mary, who would sleep one's last hours away? She had known from the first that the pearl had her life sealed in it. But never mind that now, time enough for dying tomorrow. How tidily the Lord planned—born Good Friday, died the same! But tonight was hers—to think, to sort out her chances for depriving the devil of her immortal soul. It was not the best night for pleading her case what with Christians all across the globe bending the saints' ears, but it was better than the poor captain had had, not that he needed shriving, rest him in peace. The thing to do was to clear her heart of anger, to forgive her enemies. *I forgive you, Aunt Kate, for being a stingy, hard-hearted virago, because now, as I come to think of it, it must have been a bitter thing to be born ugly and barren with a sister whose beauty made the angels so jealous they took her early to heaven. I forgive you, Uncle Paddy, dirty guzzling geezer that you are, for putting me, a helpless orphan, in the path of the devil. I forgive you, because marrying a mouldy sack like Aunt Kate would wizen the heart of a strong man, and the Lord Himself created you weak. I forgive you, Lucius Talent—*

She thrashed about on the hot bed. Surely the Lord didn't

expect her to forgive that cesspool of a Lucius! Ah, the child's trick they had played on her, him and Ramon. A trick she'd played often on the brats in the Five Points. "Hey, Casey, your ma wants ya!" Or, "Ooh—look up there!" And while the booby stretched his neck, you'd swipe his marble and run. Or, "Cheese it—the pleece!" and the chump would cheese it and leave you the loot. "Nicasia wants you!" and off she had raced, witless as a rabbit. And while she was gone, what did the cold deck do but pick itself up and throw itself over the table edge. *Oh, you don't fool me, Lucius Talent. I was born yesterday, mayhap, but where? In a Cow Bay slum where a babe is born old.* The truth was she'd been young only during the few hours she'd had with the Blackbird. Not as young as the innocent, but as young at least as the hopeful. Ah, it was a stitch in the heart even to think of him. Try as she would she could not summon his laughing face, only the wild wounded one that had to put a hand out to see with. To have hurt him so—ah, God! All in all, dying was going to be a good deal easier than living.

When the doctor came, she took a peep at him. A bald whey-faced dude who smelled of garlic and looked sicker than she. He did a mean thing or two, rolled up her eyelids, gagged her with a spoon, put his hairy ear to her breast, made her cough. He asked some questions, some of which were so indecent she wouldn't lower herself to answer. She dozed a little, half listening to their talk because it was, after all, about her.

"Yes, I know, but you say she's seventeen——"

Eighteen on the twenty-second, if I'd lived, she thought, and tears burned her lids again.

"...young people tend to run high temperatures. Her colour is poor but not jaundiced. My guess is she's anæmic. And at the moment she's contracted an acute case of grippe. That would account for the headache, the fever, the red throat, and the aches she complains of in her joints. The main thing to be thankful for is that her vomit was not black. And her eyes are not injected. Those are unmistakable signs. If it is

a jungle fever, it's a very mild case, but frankly I'm inclined to doubt it."

"It's not by any chance—uh—cholera, Dr. Poore?"

Dr. Poor is it? Belle thought scornfully. A poor doctor indeed, who didn't even know when a body was done for.

"...as evidenced by her last stool which was perfectly normal. And the little miss says she hasn't had any griping or stomach cramps. No, Mr. Talent—I've seen enough cholera——"

Lucius asked something in a low voice.

"Oh, absolutely not. Not to be moved. Bed rest for a week at least. All the broth and tea and water and orange juice she'll take. And as soon as she'll eat, light foods—custards, boiled eggs, squogs, breast of boiled chicken—she needs nourishment. Needs iron too. I'll drop over with it tomorrow. Meanwhile, here's something to make her sleep."

"Get away," Belle growled, when Lucius offered the sleeping powder.

"Here, Nicasia," she heard him whisper, "maybe she'll take it from you. Dr. Poore says she's badly in need of rest. Good night."

Poor. Poor. *Thou shalt not come poor to the new land.*

Belle sat bolt upright. "What's the time?"

"It lacks," Nicasia replied, "ten minutes of being eleven."

"Nicasia, the Lord just spoke to me and in his own words. May I be struck dead on the spot if I'm lying." She paused a moment, eyes wide on the ceiling, to give heaven a chance to prove that the words were hers, devised to call the Blackbird back. But the plaster did not crack and her breathing continued steady. "Now do as I tell you, girl. Reach into my top drawer there—the pouch, the button pouch—that's it. Saddle my horse and race with the pouch to the beach. It's the money the pearl brought. The Lord wants Jim Rideout to have it, as I'll have no need of it now. The *Undine* won't sail till midnight—you'll make it easy. If you can't find my poor laddie, give the pouch to the missionary, Goodberry and if you can't

find him, have Manuel lighter it out to the ship. Take Manuel with you to be on the safe side. Get a move on, lass, don't stand there with your teeth in your head."

"I do not wish to leave you."

"You must, stubborn girl! Get along, I say! You're raising my fever by crossing me!"

"Señor Talent believes I will stay here with you. I have promised."

Belle pounded the bed. "Would you mind a gambler and flout the Lord?" she yelled. Then seeing Nicasia's conflict, she wheedled, "Now, lovey, don't fret. Just give me the medicine the doctor left. It'll drug me so's I'll not turn in my bed the whole time you're gone."

Nicasia wrung her hands. "If I search for Manuel, Señor Talent will see me."

"Then never mind Manuel—but whatever you do, don't take Ramon. There's not time to tell you the entire tale, but Ramon is not to be trusted. Nicasia, I swear that on the Good Book. He did me a great harm today."

Nicasia sighed. Her hands opened like flowers. "Then I will make it up to you. I will take the pouch. Here is the medicine. Promise me you will stay in the bed."

"I wish you could find it in your heart to love Manuel, dear girl. He's crazy about you, you know. And he's a good, honest lad."

"Manuel is a little brother. Drink this."

"Well, Ramon is a rotten apple, if you ask me."

"I do not ask. I know. But the heart goes where it will. It is better to love than to be loved. Drink."

"Would you have me sleep my life away? I've thinking and praying to do this night."

"Mañana."

"Drat your unrepenting hide!" Belle downed the medicine painfully. "Now will you be gone—or must I snore for you as well?"

"Hasta la vista, little sister."

CHAPTER XVIII

MANUEL SET THE tray of breakfast on the bedside table. He folded the shutter doors and the day burst in, struck the sleeper's face with an open hand, set a match to the gold hair.

Lucius jerked up. Reaching for his pistol, he knocked over the glass of papaya juice which puddled on the sheet that covered his naked body.

"Confound it, what the devil— Oh, is it Miss Belle? Is she calling for me."

"A thousand pardons, your grace," Manuel said, blotting the juice with a towel. "Señor Rideout waits in the saloon. He wished to break in. I persuaded him to permit me to rouse you."

"So. The wild boar is back. I thought he'd be on the high seas by this time. I thought I'd seen the last of him and his maniacal temper."

"The *Undine* will not sail until tonight. The supplies could not be loaded because few Panameños will work on Holy Thursday. Also Good Friday. Today the passengers themselves are busy loading the ship."

"God, it's going to be a scorcher," Lucius stretched, yawned, scratched his chest with both hands. "How is Miss Belle?"

"She still sleeps. Nicasia will let no one in to disturb her. Not El Gigante. Not even el medico who came with medicine."

"Nicasia is a good girl. What's my pistol doing over there on the bureau? Did you move it ~~for~~ the tray?"

"I? No patrón. It was there—perhaps you forget——"

"Well, give it here. And fetch my toilet things."

The pistol, the dentifrice, the hot and cold towels, the hair-brush, the eye lotion, the cologne. Manuel ministered quickly, efficiently, reporting the news to his master as he assisted the toilette. "The quarters of Señor Rideout are swept clean as with a broom. All of his belongings have been moved to the ship in the night. Also the great printing machine. And this is well because this morning when I entered the room to clean, there were wild turkey feathers on the threshold."

"Turkey feathers—what nonsense is that?"

"Los Cimarrónes, patrón. A death warning. If Señor Rideout had slept in his bed last night, he, like el capitán——" Manuel made a motion as of spear-hurling.

"My luck." Talent pinched a wave above his forehead in the looking glass Manuel held. "What does he want with me now? Hasn't he done enough damage around here?"

"I'll tell you exactly what I want," Jim Rideout said from the doorway. He strode into the room.

Lucius' hand closed around his gun under the sheet. He noted testily the sand and mud that poured from the heavy boots on the saffron carpet. And with the same superficial irritation, he noticed that although the youth was dishevelled and dirty, in the same clothes of the night before, his face showed no weariness after what must certainly have been a sleepless night.

"Never mind that gun," Jim said. "It's not loaded. You won't need it. Not for a while anyway."

Lucius licked his smiling lips. He glanced to the balcony, estimating the leap. He had not used his fists yet, and he didn't intend to start now—a broken hand was very impractical in his business. Still, he wouldn't like Manuel to see him on the run. "Leave us, Manuel. Mr. Rideout and I will talk privately."

"Con permiso, patrón, I go now to the cathedral. The saloon has been cleared of debris."

The door closed behind Manuel.

"All right," Lucius said, ready to spring. "You've already wrecked my place. Now what?"

"Get up. You're coming with me to De Soto's. Belle sold her pearl to him yesterday. Two thousand dollars. I have the money here. I want that pearl back."

"Go ahead. Get it. Who's stopping you?"

"I was there early this morning. He wouldn't see me. He sent a servant to say he would not return the pearl. He's in church now but he'll be home between services. We'll be waiting for him. You and I."

Relief surged through the older man. It could have been awkward without clothing. "Listen, Jim, I'm sorry you got such a shock last night. I begged Belle to come clean with you. I felt you had a right to know. You're a young man—your whole life is ahead of you—some day you'll look back on all this and——"

Jim yanked him out of the bed by the hair, hurled him against the bureau. "Get your feathers on."

Lucius, head down, panting, eased away from the bureau knob that had bit into the softness over his kidney.

"Listen, you stupid ox," he gasped, "I'll try to get it back. Not because I'm afraid of you but because I want Belle to get well. Superstitious little idiot—she thinks she'll die without it and she's just stubborn enough to make it. But De Soto is a gentleman. In order to deal with him, I must have a shred of dignity or he'll laugh in my face. I can't have you there—glowering—or threatening. Let me go alone."

"All right. I'll be waiting. With Belle."

It was the first time Lucius had been received in the formal parlour of the De Soto home, and he vainly fought intimidation.

It was a room such as no man could put together in a single lifetime, a testimonial to centuries of wealth and privilege. Thick white plaster walls stored coolness. Damask draperies and watered-silk curtains filtered the vulgarity of the tropical

sun. The lofty ceiling was of carved hardwood, the floor laid in intricately shaded parquetry. Velvet sofas, tapestried chairs, ebony tables by no means diminished the size of the room. Rather, as in roped-off museum apartments, they served as a natural background for antique treasures. Buhl cabinets behind the glass doors of which Aztec gold figures stood in priceless collection. Vases of Capo di Monte and Sèvres, snuff and cigar boxes encrusted with precious stones. Conquistador swords with jewelled hilts and faded tassels crossed on the wall under a crested coat of arms in silver.

Even more than the display of inherited wealth, Lucius felt the impact of exhibited ancestry. From their gold-leaf frames on the thick plaster walls, the bloodless dons looked down upon him with a hauteur that literally made him perspire. It was an old threat he sweated out. The threat of patresfamilias, authoritative, punitive, emasculating. He forced himself to look away from the mordant overbred faces, concentrated on the ageing princeling they had all but destroyed.

"I have not come to beg, señor," he said, leaning against the cool marble mantel. "I am prepared to pay you well. You know what the pearl means to her, while to you—it can only be one more material acquisition. Surely you of all people wouldn't refuse to part with a bauble. You have so much. She has very little else in the way of worldly goods."

From the down pillows of the sepia sofa in which he sat half buried like a farrow in soft dirt, De Soto sniffed. "You do not insinuate, I hope, that the señorita lacks the funds with which to buy jewels. I myself receive only a small percentage of the Tiger's profits but from this I know well that she has become in the short time you have been here a woman of some means."

"Not all the diamonds or emeralds or rubies or sapphires in the world can take the place—in her eyes—of the black pearl. I have told you she believes that without it, she is doomed to die."

De Soto smiled. "It has been my experience that death is not so whimsically courted, but let us admit that the mind is

known to have over matter much power. Let us assume that without this pearl, it is possible that the señorita might languish. Accepting this romantic premise, may I ask how far your generosity extends? Five thousand? Ten thousand? I am speaking, of course, of American dollars."

Lucius' hand closed on the knob of the fire poker. He removed the brass implement from its holder, with it knocked the side of his boot. The action caught him in the back where the knob had punched him and he grimaced with pain.

"Very well—if that is your price, I accept. Ten thousand."

Oil started from the pores of the Panameño's pitted cheeks. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his face, looked at the handkerchief. "Generous indeed. Unfortunately, my gallant friend, the pearl has become to me also an object of romance. I have planned to present it to my wife this day as an Easter gift——"

"I have met your charming wife," Lucius broke in. "She struck me as a very sympathetic young gentlewoman. Couldn't you explain——?"

"That is possible, of course. Very well. I shall do exactly that. A moment, señor."

Señor de Soto wriggled to his feet, pulled a bell rope. A manservant appeared in the doorway.

"Have the goodness to ask the patróna to come at once to the parlour, Perico. I desire her presence."

The manservant bowed, withdrew.

De Soto offered a box of cigars.

"Thank you, no, my friend," Lucius refused. "It is a little early in the day for me."

De Soto took one for himself, waved it under his nose, held a match to it, filled his lungs, exhaled with virtuosity, studied the cigar. "After a long morning of prayer in the cathedral, there is nothing more rewarding than fine tobacco."

They both turned at the rustle of skirts in the archway.

In her own context, Señora de Soto was an altogether different woman from the importunate tryster Lucius knew. She

looked, in fact, so contained, so unapproachable that for a moment a flicker of sexual interest fanned in him again. Her black silk gown was superbly cut to show off her small waist and full olive-skinned bosom. Tear-drop pearls trembled from her ear-lobes and garnets accentuated the pallor of her throat. She glided down the vast parlour.

"You sent for me, Don Bartolo? Ah, Señor Talent, what a surprise!"

Lucius bowed over the soft familiar hand. "Buenas días, señora," he murmured, and the militant perfection of her coiffure was not lost upon him, nor the powder that whitened her skin. She had no doubt groomed herself carefully for him despite the pretence of surprise. But he was not prepared for the venomous glitter in her large dark eyes. He cursed his stupidity. He should have known better than to expect an ally in the mistress he had only last week finally dismissed.

They exchanged amenities—the weather, the holiday, each other's health. The manservant rolled in a teacart of wine and cakes. Lucius partook of both, praised both.

"I am glad the wine pleases you," De Soto said. "Forgive us if we do not join you. We fast until sundown."

The tick of the ormolu clock on the mantel became audible before De Soto introduced the subject of the pearl. He explained to his wife the circumstances of its purchase, their guest's reason for wanting to retrieve it. He took the señora's hand, and turning it over, kissed the palm and then placed upon it the black pearl. "Knowing your fondness for pearls, Dona Adelina, I bought it for you. As an Easter present. The señor has offered for it the impressive sum of ten thousand dollars. The money of course is of no importance. The decision of whether or not you wish to accommodate Señor Talent is yours to make."

Señora de Soto barely glanced at the stone, set it negligently on the table at her side. She smiled at her husband with languid melancholy. "A most unusual one. I am deeply touched. Do as you wish with it, my husband."

De Soto smiled. "You see how it is with the women of my country, Señor Talent. Always they defer to the husband. This is not generally the habit of your countrywoman, no? Or do I judge on too little evidence the manners of American ladies? After all, the girls of the cabaret are perhaps not typical?"

Lucius rose abruptly from his chair. "Some other day I should enjoy a discussion on the relative merits of North and South American womanhood. Today, if you'll pardon my impatience, I'm anxious to get back to the sick room."

Señor de Soto inclined his head. "Very well. We will be quick. You are a gambler, no?"

"Of course."

"Then let us gamble. It will be diverting. You will wager ten thousand dollars. With my wife's permission, I will wager the pearl. How does that suit you?"

"Fine. What is your pleasure, sir?"

"Well, naturally we cannot play cards. You are too practised for a novice like myself. And dice I dislike. It is a game for peóns, no?"

"Anything's all right with me," Lucius snapped, nettled by the man's second reference to class distinctions. "Only let's get it over with." He walked to the window, looked out on the patio's aviary, the huge ferns, the fountain. His eyes travelled to the roof of the third story. "There are two buzzards sitting on your roof, De Soto. I'll bet that the bird on my right will fly off first."

De Soto laughed. "Válgame Dios, señor! Buzzards are the most patient of birds. They might well sit in that spot for hours. If you are in a hurry, I advise you to think of some other wager."

Lucius looked vexedly around the room. He was too angry to think clearly. Angry at the price De Soto had named and the way he had trapped him into accepting it. Angry at the vengeful disinterest of Señora de Soto. At the mischance of having been born the son of a poor and poor Lutheran preacher. His eye fell on a large bowl of chocolate balls. "Let's

bet on how many chocolates that bowl holds. The guess nearest the actual number wins."

"Ah, but it would be tedious counting all those many little candies," De Soto demurred. "And I see that my wife is already yawning with boredom at our foolish game."

Lucius eyed De Soto, on guard at last. "Then suppose you name the wager, señor."

De Soto turned his hands up. "If you desire it. I believe I have thought of an excellent gamble, my friend. If you will do me the favour of observing the coat of arms on the wall, you will notice two symbols on the shield. On one side of the fess, the horns of a bull. On the other a leaf of the palm. For centuries it has been a tradition that each woman received into our family by marriage be marked on her thigh with one of those symbols. Which would you guess, Señor Talent, is the symbol with which my beautiful young wife was marked—the horns of the bull or the leaf of the palm?"

Señora de Soto gasped. She pressed the lace handkerchief to her lips, closed her eyes. A petal fell from one of the roses on to the polished floor. The clock ticked. Outside, a bird trilled. Lucius strolled to the coat of arms, pretended to study the blazon. Then he walked back to stand before De Soto's chair, looked down at him, watched the string of sweat-beads form on the man's forehead. Two fat fingers wiped the beads away.

"My guess, sir, is that your wife is marked with the horns of the bull."

De Soto smiled, stood up, bowed, but he breathed through his mouth as if he had been running. "I regret, señor, to inform you that you have lost the wager. Would it please you to be given proof, or will you accept my word?"

A small moan escaped the lace handkerchief.

"I have always believed in the honour that exists between gentlemen and thieves," Lucius replied. He bowed to each. "I bid you good day."

"Permit me to escort you to the door, señor," De Soto said.

In the dark vaulted foyer, Lucius took his cane from the refectory table, put on his hat, slipped on his gloves.

"You'll have your money before sundown."

"Your *crédit* is always excellent, my friend. *Vaya con Dios.*"

The manservant held open the brass-studded door.

"Señor Talent! Momentito!" Señora de Soto came forward from the shadows, held out a little sugar lamb decorated with a bright paper nosegay. "A souvenir of the Panama Easter," she said. "It is filled with little sweets. I think the sick girl will enjoy to have it."

Lucius hesitated, accepted the absurdity. "Thank you, madam. I'm sure you give nothing that you cannot easily spare."

Belle flopped back against the pillows. A sweat of weakness misted her skin, and she loosened her hand from his. "So there you have it—the story of my life entirely, Five Points and all. And I don't doubt you never heard a grislier."

"It's all behind you, dearest," Jim said, playing with her fingers. "You've been mistreated and bullied and trapped for the last time. You have me now."

"Ah, Jim, but it's eased me to say it all in a string. I vow you're as good as a priest. The worst of the shame's off my chest. And the fear. Some say the Lord loves a repentant sinner better than He does them who never did a wicked thing. There might be a place in heaven for me, after all. When I see God, I'll ask Him to be good to you, darling love."

"Now, Belle—"

"What worries me is the medicine the doctor brought over this morning. Nicasia forced it into me—and it smelled of brimstone. You don't think that's a sign?"

"Belle, stop—listen to me. Sick or well, you're leaving on the ship with me tonight." He smiled down at the small wan face which seemed to have shrunk in the night. And the green eyes to have grown. "If you insist upon dying, you can do it

there. We'll dump you over the side and I'll see that Mr. Goodberry gives my little wife a fine eulogy."

"Don't jest, man. The very thought of deep water gives me a chill."

"Then stop talking like a goose. Now listen. The *Undine* won't sail till midnight. That will give you a full day of rest in bed. We'll leave around ten—let's hope there's no moon—I gather the Cimarróns are still trying to nail me."

"And Lucius—you think he'll sit by with his hands folded while we ride off? Even if I had the strength to get up, the which I have not."

"That's the only danger point—getting off the Tiger grounds. Once we cross the plaza, we'll be all right. Manuel and I have worked out a plan. It seems there's a big parade tonight. A holy procession that goes down the main street, Avenida Centrale, to the beach where the natives shoot off fireworks. Then they return to the plaza to burn Judas Iscariot in effigy. Every Panameño, man, woman, and child, turns out for the spectacle. We'll be part of the crowd."

"Jim darling, I couldn't foot it to the beach—believe me, I couldn't. And if you tried carrying me—a grown girl—we'd stick out like sore thumbs. You're easy enough to spot without that—head and shoulders above the other men, and that's not a manner of speaking."

"But I have a plan——"

Their hands tightened as they caught the sound of hoofs in the courtyard.

Nicasia rapped softly. "He is come, Señor Rideout."

Jim covered Belle to her chin. He stopped Lucius on the landing.

"Hand it over."

Lucius shook his head. "I didn't get it. He wouldn't sell. I persuaded him to gamble for it—a wager—ten thousand fish against the pearl——"

"Ten thousand!"

"Ten. And the greaser won. Let me see Belle."

"I don't think she'll see you."

"Is she worse?"

"No—but——"

"Ask her. Please."

When Jim re-entered the room, Belle's face was turned to the wall.

"Belle——."

"I heard. Tell him to get away from here."

"Maybe this is God's way of curing you of superstition, Belle. Because you're going to get well, you know. I'm going to see that you do. Nicasia, go fetch Miss Belle some broth."

"I don't care for any."

Jim's nod overruled Belle. As Nicasia's braids swung out the door, Lucius shut in.

"Listen, little one. I haven't given up, I'll think of some way of getting your pearl back, I swear I will. Meanwhile, I'll buy you another luck stone. As soon as the stores open. A diamond. How would you like a genuine diamond——?"

Belle drew her legs up under the sheet. "Get away."

Downcast, Lucius started out. "Here," he said, setting the sugar lamb on the dresser, "I forgot—Señora de Soto sent you some candy."

"Get out and take her candy with you," Belle said to the wall.

Lucius sighed, shrugged, left.

"Belle?" Jim touched her shoulder.

No answer.

"Sweetheart, please."

She made no move, no sound. He wanted to shake her. He jammed his fists into his pockets, walked to the window, stared down at the sparkling cobbles. A crow picked at a clod of manure. He looked back over his shoulder. Her hand trailed loose on the coverlet behind her curled body. Somehow the sight of that hand—small, perfect, mute as a starfish—caught at his heart. His impatience melted and a single desire consumed him—to restore the self-seeking of that hand, to make

it reach for something, to make it clutch again in need or greed. His eye fell on the Easter lamb on the dresser and he took it and turned her hand up and closed her limp fingers around it.

"Look, Belle dearest—it's a lamb, a lying-down lamb, glistening with sugar and decorated with posies. See—there's a line through its middle. It opens. The candy must be inside."

Her eyelids fluttered. And then, because there was still more child in her than she pretended, she rolled over, slowly sat up.

The sugared box divided in her hands.

"Unh!" she gasped on a sharp intake of breath. "Jim!"

There, in the nether half, on a bed of coloured candies, lay the smoke-black pearl.

CHAPTER XIX

AT THE NORTH-EAST end of the Panama beach, a dense tangle of shrubbery and trees—palm, coco, banana, sarsaparilla, giant copaiba—fell unbroken from the hills to the lip of the sea. In one of the copaibas, under an umbrella of leaves, Ramon hunched, half stood, bare feet braced in a crotch of branches, hands curled around a bejuco spear—the spear, lo mismo, that had killed el capitán. He felt very much alone with the weapon. There were few men on the isthmus who would touch a bejuco spear or any other article fashioned by los Cimarrónes, who were known to imbue their belongings with strange and powerful medicine. He was surprised himself at his daring, and every now and then he took one of his hands from the shaft and wiped it on his breechclout. The packet in his breechclout made him feel a little less alone. One thousand American dollars. Not stolen. Paid. Paid to him by Señor Talent. A Panameño could live a lifetime on a thousand dollars and never do a stroke of work. There was also the ten dollars of yesterday for passing on the information he had received through the wall. With the ten dollars he would buy a white cock. As a rich man who owned a white cock he would stage many fights and win more and more money. No more washing glasses for Yanquis. No more getting out of bed at sunrise. Now he would be his own man and live as he pleased. On Monday he would buy a pair of boots and every day he would shine them with orange peels as he had seen the little cousin Manuelito do many times. Manuelito had a black horse with a saddle of silver; he, Ramon, would have a white. When he

rode through the streets, the little children and the nuns would run and scream and press themselves against the buildings, and the girls would toss their heads and flash their teeth at him and cry, "Hola, caballero!"

There was only this thing to do with the spear.

"And if I miss?" he had asked.

"If you miss, you will be well paid for trying. If your aim is true, you will receive an additional five hundred dollars for succeeding. You have nothing to lose. I myself will manœuvre Rideout into target position. How can you hesitate, Ramon? What danger do you think there could be? Certainly none from your own people. One Yanqui more or less matters very little to them. And the Americans will lay the deed to the Indians."

"You are sure he still plans to steal La Tigrita from you? Even if she is sick in the bed?"

"I'm sure."

"But if you are wrong? If she is very sick and he comes alone?"

"Look, this is unnecessary. She's not that sick. Nevertheless, we'll have a signal. If I want you to kill, I'll take off my coat. I'll be wearing a white shirt. With all those torches, you're bound to see my white shirt."

"White shirt—kill. Yo comprendo. But, forgive me, patrón, I wish to be clear. If you do not take the coat off, I do not get paid?"

It was then that the gambler had reached into his coat pocket, handed him the money. "Any more questions?" he had asked with a Yanqui smile.

Ramon's hand went again to the hard flat package that lay thrilling as the hand of a woman on his belly. If only Coco were with him, he would have no loneliness. Poor hombrecito, tied to the leg of his bed—what a fury, what a scratching, what a chittering there must be at this moment in the dark hole of a room behind Benancia's pantry. That Benancia, a

bony old grandmother with a mouth like a bitter red berry. Tomorrow he would tell her where she could go.

He looked out over the water. In the distance the winking gold lights of the American ships, and above them the silver stars. The Pacific was calm, the little white waves running like fingers on to the sand.

Nombre de Dios, they came ! The lights and the people and the band screeching as for brave bulls. Caramba, he had never had a better view, that was the truth !

Tara, tara, tarara—on came the musicians, barefoot in white pantaloons and turkey-red sashes, blowing their trumpets and fifes, banging their drums. And on either side, the pageant-struck mob pressed against the chain of muskets, dimmed the brilliance of the tympany with their hoarse impassioned chanting.

Behind, between two fences of torch fire snaked the gaudy procession. The first cart, drawn by a flower-wreathed mustang, carried the bier on which lay the bloodstained figure of the Saviour. Surrounding the bier, white-cloaked, hooded men carried lighted candles attached to bamboo poles. Their white-robed women followed, two by two, and then the children with wired wings, holding aloft the Passion symbols—the cross, the spear, the crown, the hammer and the nails. After the angels, the Sorrowful Virgin, set on a pedestal that contained its own candleholders. The beams of the glowing platform rested on the shoulders of four stalwart blacks.

Cart after torchlit cart, image after image. Saint James the small and Saint James the large. Jude and Andrew. Philip and Paul. The band halted at the end of the sea wall, almost to the thicket. There they would wait until their music piped the laity from the beach and back to the plaza for the hanging and the burning of the despised betrayer. The early carts began to double back to deposit the carved figures. The spectators spilled off the wall, thronging the beach where the fireworks would soon be discharged. The apostles kept coming. Mathias, Bartholomew, Thomas, John, Simon called Peter.

After the last saint, the fat priest of the cathedral walked alone, majestic in violet surplice and cream lace stole, his cross swinging on its chain across his knees. At a respectful distance behind him, the black-robed priests of lesser churches, and then the nuns carrying banners embroidered in silver and gold, carrying tapers and bowls of smoking incense. The incense mingled with the salt and seaweed, and then the first rocket—a gold comet tail—sparked across the sky, and the smell of brimstone fought the indoor smell of holiness that the incense gave off and the outdoor smell of marine night.

When the religious were headed back toward town, the band struck up a prancing martial tune. The natives frolicked in the sand, screaming at every discharge of the rockets. Great bursts of phosphorescent red and gold and blue and green surged high into the heavens, died with a hiss in the sea. Stars with lashing dragon-tails . . . flowers of fire opening huge petals and dropping streamers of gold dust. . . .

This night Ramon had no eyes for the fiery miracles that were looked forward to by young and old, rich and poor, from one spring to the next. He was thankful only for the light they shed on the beach. His searching glance found Manuel and a friar pulling a haycart—the hay for the burning of Judas Iscariot. Manuel and the monk came closer, heading toward the water's edge where balsa lighters bobbed on the tide. That was some big monk, Ramon thought to himself, bigger than any Panameño he knew. Ah, si. The friar threw back his hood. El Gigante. And then—por Dios, the gambler was not easily fooled—La Tigrita. They were lifting her out of the hay, Manuel and El Gigante. (So, now, the time is here, and you, Señor Talent, where are you, what is keeping you?) They were brushing the straws from her green cloak. She stood on the tips of her toes to put kisses on her man's face. (Not so sick, eh, Tigrita, not so sick like you pretended.) Now Manuel was taking the cart away. Manuelito, he was the sly one, eh? Knew everything, told nothing. Nada.

Ramon's glance flicked to the avenue in time to see his

master urge his horse with flapping elbows over the wall to the beach. The horse stumbled in the shale, steadied, and, obeying the spurs, bore down through the howling crowd. Ramon tensed his body for the throw. He watched the gambler jump off his horse, fling off his hat and then his coat. El Gigante was carrying the girl to the canoe. He turned at the prod of Señor Talent's gun, set his burden down with care, ah, with much care, on the sand.

Ramon's heart began to pound in his chest, his wrists, his ears. Señor Talent was talking steadily, his gun pointed. Señor Rideout was saying nothing, only taking small sidesteps toward the trees. As the two men drew within his range, Ramon began to think with exhilarating speed and clarity. This Yanqui, Rideout, he wished to leave Panama pronto, no? And La Tigrita also. Right away, ahora, on the waiting ship of lights. Would it not be smarter then to kill Señor Talent? With the young lovers on the ship and Señor Talent out of the way, who stood between Ramon de Bega and all the money in the safe in the little parlour?

Señor Talent had backed away from the giant one. Both were talking, both were standing still. Señor Talent was turned toward the trees and for an instant his head raised. *Now.* Ramon took a deep breath, drew his arm back, hurled the spear. It went into the ruffles of the white shirt. The gambler fell on his back on the white sand. Near hysteria with relief, Ramon clambered quickly down the rear of the trunk. As he descended, he glimpsed Rideout on the run after him. Before he could lose himself in the brush, the shot burned him in the back and he pitched forward into blackness.

NOTE TO READER

The Undine sailed for the Golden Gate from the port of Panama within the first hour of Saturday, April 7, 1849. Portions of the barque's log are to be found in the Tioga County Museum in Boone City, California. The record of the first day under sail on Pacific waters mentions the entrance into holy matrimony by Mr. Jeremiah Rideout and Miss Belle McGlory, the rites performed under witness of the captain and his first mate by the Reverend Thomas Goodberry "in the privacy of Mr. Rideout's cabin, due to the indisposition of the bride." The voyage took forty-eight days, "protracted by headwinds and calms, and attended with storms and gales."

In a letter to his sister, Clarissa, a page of which is legible under glass in the Hillmount Library in Los Angeles, Jeremiah Rideout describes his disappointment at his first glimpse of California: ". . . an uninviting stretch of coastal wasteland and barren hills." Further, he represents San Francisco as "a mud hole, crowded, noisy, fantastically expensive, with half the population living in tents and one-third of the sturdier structures devoted to saloons and gambling-houses." He goes on to say: "My good wife purchased a single potato today for forty-five cents. We have secured lodgings in a garret, but we have no doubt that we may soon better our surroundings. Everyone here is hungry for news, the hundred or so left-over Panama Bugles which I brought with me having sold out in two hours for two dollars a copy. One of the lodgers offered me fifty dollars for my boots which I refused. I wish, dear Clare, that—" The preserved page ends there and Jeremiah's wish is lost to posterity.

